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REVIEWED

PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE FORGOTTEN SANDS
RED DEAD REDEMPTION
METAL GEAR SOLID: PEACE WALKER
ALPHA PROTOCOL
CHAOS RINGS
JOE DANGER
BLUR





Last month we took delivery of *Split Second: Velocity*, and in this issue we review *Blur* and showcase the exquisite lines of *Need For Speed Hot Pursuit*. Is this the racing game revival fans of tarmac-hugging action have been waiting for?

Could be. It's certainly been an unusual couple of months in the **Edge** office, a place that has in recent years more often reverberated with the zing of gunfire rather than the rasp of engines. The fourplayer splitscreen *Blur* sessions of recent weeks, in particular, have recalled a simpler era when games came on cartridges, controllers were wired, and unleashing a lightning bolt was to mark your head as a target for aggressively flung sofa cushions. But Bizarre Creations' game only has so much in common with *Super Mario Kart 64* – our review of the game (see p96) outlines the distinctive qualities it brings to the genre.

Where do you begin with the *Need For Speed* franchise? If Criterion, the latest guardian of the flame, is to believed, new instalment *Hot Pursuit* will be at its most powerful in multiplayer too. And it should know, having previously made *Burnout Paradise*, a game that, post-launch, became a bold, ongoing experiment in servicing a community that thrives on shared experiences, forming a kind of online enthusiasts' club with none of the haplessness associated with real-world car bores. But *Hot Pursuit* will be a more adversarial experience, and on p52 we take a look at how Criterion is breeding a new game of cat and mouse.

Split Second: Velocity, *Blur* and *Hot Pursuit* are all UK productions, which feeds conveniently into this issue's concluding look back at our games of the last decade, focusing on *Grand Theft Auto III*, produced by DMA Design in Scotland. This game, too, has just a little bit of interest in four-wheeled modes of transport, but on p82 we consider its broader, more powerful contributions to entertainment.

Our games of the decade have inspired a new series of subscriber gifts, too. If you want to buy **Edge** at a reduced price and you're in the market for a couple of new T-shirts for the summer, see the offer on p90.



Image from God of War III, courtesy of Sony Computer Entertainment America Inc.

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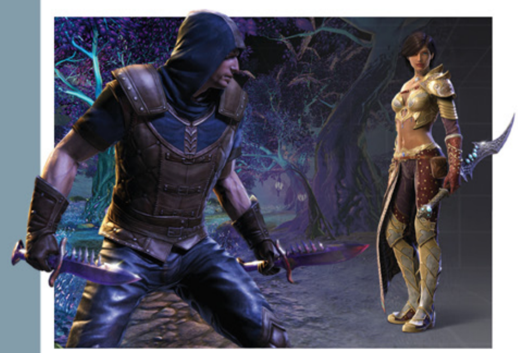


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Bags of entertainment

How Sony's approach to digital distribution is changing the rules of handheld gaming for both creators and consumers

Today, the elephant isn't in the room, it's just down the street. We're visiting Sony's central London HQ to pick over the first eight months of its Minis programme – a range of small, 'snackable' titles digitally distributed via the PlayStation Store – and to get here we've had to walk past the shining bulk of Apple's flagship UK store, its window displays proclaiming this the era of the iPhone App.

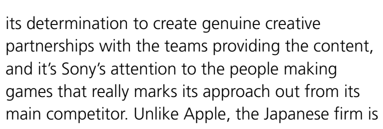
Sony might not enjoy the comparison – as it turns out, the comparison might not even be particularly relevant – but it's not going to go away any time soon. With its bite-size mandate placing it somewhere between the likes of XBLA or Wii- and DSiWare on one hand and Xbox Live Indie Games on the other, Apple was always going to provide the yardstick for Minis. That's a shame. By any other standards, Sony's 60 titles in eight months would be an astonishing success, but iTunes is stocking up with hundreds of new games every week, and has most of the videogame industry simultaneously fretting over a transformed marketplace and scurrying to capitalise on it.

It's interesting, however, that Sony doesn't seem to be particularly perturbed. "We've got 60 titles, but the key thing for us is that they're quality titles," says **Zeno Colaço**, Sony's vice president of publisher and developer relations, letting the implied contrast hang in the air. After less than a year of operating the Minis platform, then, it seems that while Sony probably wouldn't mind Apple's revenue, it's pretty pleased with how its actual games have turned out.



Sony's vice president of publisher and developer relations, Zeno Colaço, has been with the company for 17 years





"Over half our publishers have come back to do a second or a third game – Halfbrick [whose Minis include *Echoes* (above, right)] has done four games," says Colaço. "With 60 million PSPs, there's a significant possibility here. We've really legitimised the PSP as a digital device"

Rightly so, as the Minis are already a varied and intriguing bunch. While there's a handful of clunking ports and rush jobs on the PlayStation Store's shelves, you don't have to search for very long to discover real quality. Larger publishers have embraced the platform – EA in particular graced launch day with its best version of *Tetris* in years – while even the tiniest of developers have proven that smaller games don't have to feel insubstantial. PomPom's *Alien Zombie Death* is as powerful a time-eater as anything the team has previously made, while Mediatonic's *Monsters (Probably) Stole My Princess* is a genuine oddball charmer.

Larger publishers have embraced the platform, while even the tiniest of developers have proven that smaller games don't have to feel insubstantial

Not bad for a portfolio drawn together in less than a year. "It was at E3 last June when we started to look at partnerships with a few developers," says Colaço. "We had three key objectives. The first was to create a new category of games for the PlayStation Network. The second was to get a new set of content creators who might have traditionally looked at handheld or console gaming and thought that was something they couldn't necessarily get into because of the barriers there. Thirdly, we wanted to get new, innovative and, we hoped, lighter content."

That pitch, aimed at the dev community as squarely as the console audience, may go some way to explaining why Sony refuses to simply chase after Apple's hardware. Key to the Minis plan was its determination to create genuine creative partnerships with the teams providing the content, and it's Sony's attention to the people making games that really marks its approach out from its main competitor. Unlike Apple, the Japanese firm is still asking potential developers to pay for its SDK (although it's worth noting that the PSP devkit price was slashed by 80 per cent when Minis were launched), which might reveal why it won't be beating iTunes in terms of numbers any time soon. But despite higher barriers to entry, the PlayStation Network – in its own way – makes a tantalising case for smaller design teams.

Crucial to its appeal is the guarantee of prominence on a storefront that, so far, has few of the discovery problems of iTunes. While Apps are increasingly launched into a swamp of other content, Minis are clearly visible for weeks after their release. Given the regimented and sedate pace of PlayStation Store updates, they won't be buried alive by hundreds of other items, and they won't have to rely as much on the social network lottery to make sales.

Most importantly, they won't be victims of a marketplace that can only shift a majority of its games at a price of 59p. iTunes' infamous race to the bottom is a subject that makes many iPhone developers admit that the App Store might be something of a no-win scenario. At 59p, a game has to sell in bulk to make profits, and the knock-on effect is that smaller teams can't risk developing anything truly ambitious. Sony's Minis may cost a bit more, but there's little question that they're more substantial offerings – a fact that was reinforced for many in December, when they were







As with Apple's App Store, Sony doesn't have concept approval over any of the Minis (such as *Kahoots*, pictured here) on the PSN Store

suddenly rendered playable on PS3 as well as PSP. "I think we're creating something that sits between mobile content and traditional games," says Colaço, shrugging off comparisons to the App Store and the downloadable strategies of Nintendo and Microsoft. "As such, it's important to realise that there's no cannibalisation here. Publishers ask, 'Is this going to challenge my traditional PSP business? Is it going to challenge my traditional mobile business? Now it's on PS3, does it challenge my PS3 business?' I don't think so. It's great to see stuff like *Championship Manager* doing well as a Mini as well as a more traditional game because it proves that this isn't cannibalising sales elsewhere. It shows that it's an additional opportunity rather than a matter of substitution."

"It's great to see stuff like Championship Manager doing well as a Mini as well as a more traditional game because it proves this isn't cannibalising sales elsewhere"

If the benefit to the developer is clear, it's worth asking what the audience gets for the Minis' higher price. The answer? Buttons. "You're getting a dedicated gaming device with the PSP," says Colaço, a point that will ring true for anyone who finds the mixture of taps, swipes and tilts that makes up many iPhone game control schemes intriguing rather than convincing. "We think that's a differentiator that you can't overestimate."

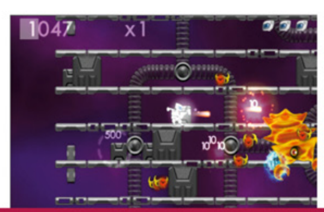
Colaço hopes it isn't just the interface that marks Minis out as a Sony initiative. "We've not just dreamt this up from June last year," he says. "To a certain extent, this is going all the way back to the work we did with Yaroze, allowing new coders to create content for the first PlayStation. We've always had the aspect of this. We've always been thinking of this space, and now the market has aligned."

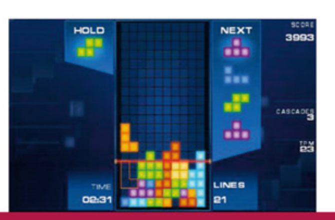
All of which ties in to one of Sony's long-term ambitions for the platform: that it works as a means of bringing new teams into the console space – and on a much more professional footing than the legions of amateurs plugging away at XNA titles. "On the services side, we support Mini developers the way we'd support normal developers," says Colaço. "We don't just set you off on the environment and then take a revenue cut down the line. We discuss with developers what we think might be a good product in this space, and we can offer feedback on content. Then there's the technical aspect: access to our devnet, access to our tools and libraries. You're getting access to a huge number of experienced developers and engineers. You're not just out in the wilderness. We're actually doing more for Mini developers proportionately than we're doing to support traditional developers. That's because we believe it's an important space."

This approach seems to be working. "The key thing with our publisher stats is that three quarters of our game creators are brand new to the PlayStation," says Colaço. "A third of those are brand new to consoles. That's been a huge success from our point of view. You get a group like Honeyslug: they had a three-man team and a budget of £30. We loaned them a development kit, and then they were off making *Kahoots*. You can't get more efficient than that. And the thing is, that game now has an 81 percent Metacritic."

Sony hopes that more established publishers will see the opportunity to embrace Minis alongside work on more substantial titles. "Whatever the company size, it's a useful space for innovation because the barriers of entry are so low," argues Colaço. "It allows people to get a very good feeling of what the market thinks of an idea before they can then take it to other areas. It's a proving ground."

Colaço also believes that there's the potential in this market to see the emergence of studios focused exclusively on Minis, a movement that has









Five of the best Minis to date

Alien Zombie Death
PomPom

The makers of *Mutant Storm* return to blasting with this scrolling arena combat title that sees a spaceman defending mining platforms from aliens. With great power-ups and a neat combo system, this is one of the developer's most involving games, or, as PomPom's Michael Michael put it, "the same as our other crap, but from the side".

Tetris
EA

EA makes *Tetris* fresh again in this smart update that sees the core game boosted by a range of unlockable variants that act as a kind of deranged suite of missions. Bending the world's most familiar game rules into bizarre new shapes was always going to be interesting, but it didn't have to be anywhere near as successful as this.

Fieldrunners
Subatomic Studios

Already famous as one of the most convincingly realised tower defence titles for iPhone/iPod Touch, Subatomic Studios' cartoonish classic takes a hike in price as it crosses platforms, but more than makes up for it with brilliantly reconfigured controls and presentation that makes the most of the console's greatest asset – its 16:9 screen.

Kahoots
Honeyslug

Honeyslug's debut takes the patchwork visuals of *LittleBigPlanet* and uses them to bring character to its brilliantly demanding 2D gauntlets. Lo-fi and surprisingly cruel, *Kahoots* manages to be supremely inventive within the tightest of restrictions – everything a PSP Mini title aspires to be, in other words.

already been kicked off by Bernard Schulenberg, designer of the forthcoming Mini *Where Is My Heart?* Is that a trend Colaço can see continuing? "Definitely. One of the things is that we haven't gone into this on a whim. It's not just a fashion play. When you look at what's changed in the last ten years in terms of how people consume products, snackable games is a big category. I've been asked, 'Is this a defensive play?' Not at all. It's something we think is important, and over time it's only going to become more important."

The overall importance of Minis is something that may extend past the platform's 100MB limit, as Sony uses the games as a means of getting a sense of what consumers are looking for as handheld consoles make the transition away from physical media towards exclusively digitally distributed content. But Colaço isn't ready to draw a line directly from the Minis to any future PSP iteration – yet. "What I can say is that we're testing the capabilities of our existing platforms to get a sense of how snackable games work," he says. "Clearly the market is attentive to that, because they're selling, and they're selling well. There's an awareness in the whole market as to how the way that consumers are approaching content is changing."

As for the future of the Minis themselves, with the platform likely to see its hundredth title before the end of the year, Sony's happy that it's moving in the right direction, creating a stable marketplace for developers, even if the games, true to their self-effacing branding, have yet to threaten Apple's market share. "It's been successful," says Colaço, rubbing his hands together somewhat impatiently. "Now we need to sustain it, to add to it. Do we see this as an important part of future business?" He laughs. "Clearly we do."



Sweet success

The PSP Minis picture from a development perspective

Honeyslug is a boutique developer based in London, founded by Ricky Haggett, Mark Inman and Nat Marco in 2008 to make games across a number of platforms. As well as *Kahoots*, Honeyslug released *My Pet Dinosaur* on PC and *Balloon-Headed Boy* and *Ric Rococo: International Art Thief* on iPhone. Haggett outlines the benefits of working on a Mini:

"We contacted Sony to see if they'd be interested in looking at some prototypes, and Shahid Ahmad from developer relations visited us the following week. We showed him *Kahoots*, he told us about the Mini platform, and it seemed like a great fit. The chance to be involved with a platform launch was exciting, as was the opportunity to release a game on a console we'd not worked on before.

"In terms of devkits, if you're from a PC/Windows background there's not much difference in hardware costs. In fact, depending on what model of Mac/iPhone/iPad you buy, investment in Apple development can be more expensive. But neither one is expensive enough to be a barrier to entry, even for small developers. We were new to PSP development, yet had *Kahoots* running on the console in six weeks, thanks in no small part to some first rate technical support – we were surprised and delighted at the speed with which the dev support engineers turned around solutions and answers to our queries. The game suits the PSP screen really well, plays great on the D-pad and provides a whole load of content – 50 levels – broken into manageable chunks. The price feels right for the quality of the game and the amount of gameplay time.

"There's also the sense that PSN can support quirky titles like *Kahoots*. One of the main reasons I bought a PS3 was to play games like *Fl0w*, *Noby Noby Boy* and the Pixeljunk games. It feels like Sony are doing as much as they can to provide a supportive environment for indies making interesting games, and in turn players are coming to realise that they can expect to see really awesome, exciting games coming out of leftfield on PSN.

"It's worked out great in a number of ways. As well as being commerically successful, *Kahoots* has been a critical hit for us. It has a Metacritic score of 81, and it was number eight in the top-rated PSP games of 2009, which in turn means people have written some truly lovely things about the game. In particular, Pegbeast [the villain of *Kahoots*] has become a minor celebrity, and needs his ego gently massaging at regular intervals!

"We've learned a lot about publishing – that even as a small developer, you can do a lot of things yourself, including dealing with a platform holder and releasing a console game. In that sense it's taught us to be bolder and more ambitious. It's been great to work with Sony post-launch, too. We've done some guest posts on the PlayStation blog, filmed a making-of video for PlayStation Europe, as well as working with them on a number of promotional campaigns."



Championship Manager 2010
Eidos

Competing with full-priced retail versions, *Championship Manager 2010* emerges as a surprisingly fully featured game, including everything from managing transfers to dealing with the press. As one of the few big-name Minis, it's likely that other mainstream publishers will be following the fortunes of Eidos's evergreen with interest.





SOFTWARE



The soul burns strong

Despite its disregard for trends, Demon's Souls has a huge following. As the game heads to Europe, we learn how From Software struck gold

It's hard to imagine a game more at odds with gaming's current fashions than *Demon's Souls*. As developers fall over themselves to reward players for the emptiest of achievements, From Software's stern demand that players learn, understand and master its game's systems, or else face severe punishment, seems anachronistic. Likewise, the dark, heavy fantasy setting runs contrary to the JRPG's ongoing primary-coloured charm aesthetic, while the ponderous, precise nature of the combat contains none of the insta-thrill of its exuberant, button-mashing contemporaries. And yet, despite all this, few games in the last decade of scale and budget have enjoyed the kind of grassroots success *Demon's Souls* has found in its slow but steady journey around the globe.

"I'm no fan of the genre westerners refer to as the JRPG," says **Takeshi Kajii**, the producer at Sony Computer Entertainment who first approached From Software with the proposition to rediscover a lost breed of action game. "I've always loved the dark fantasy genre, from *Wizardry* right through to *King's Field*. Yet games that assume that aesthetic these days are usually, at their heart, more like science-fiction. So my desire was to revisit this lost area of gaming, to rediscover a charismatic corner of the medium."

For game director **Hidetaka Miyazaki**, the interest was shared. "I'd worked exclusively on *Armored Core* titles in my role at From Software," he explains. "But I'd always wanted to make a dark fantasy game that drew on the Fighting Fantasy series of books. The *Demon's Souls* project was that opening that I'd always been waiting for.

But while *Demon's Souls* is heavily influenced by fantasy fiction cliché, in play it appears vividly distinctive. "I think because our influences came from other media the team felt very free to approach things differently," Miyazaki explains. "I never had a videogame influence in mind when writing the design documents. Of course, people need to make comparisons and our game has been likened to *Diablo*, *Wizardry*, *Monster Hunter* and even *Bushido Blade*. But none quite fit. I think this is because our orientation for the game was so different. We weren't built around cutscenes or scenario, as in so many action-RPGs. Rather, our aim was to have the player feel rewarded simply by playing the game. Not for completing a quest or finding a prize or winning loot, but simply by playing and experiencing the game."

Of course, by attempting something visually familiar yet mechanically unusual, the team risked alienating its audience at first touch. "When we first demo'd *Demon's Souls* at the Tokyo Game Show it was nothing short of a disaster," explains Kajii. "People were initially excited about the idea of a dark fantasy game, but they were so critical of the gameplay. Many people presumed we were still working on the combat at that stage of development, despite it being nearly finished! The truth is *Demon's Souls* is just not well suited to previews, particularly at shows. You can't possibly understand its approach in five minutes. Because of the action-RPG style people simply expected it to handle in the same way as *Sengoku Musou*. When it didn't, they were left disoriented. This feeling was compounded by the fact that the

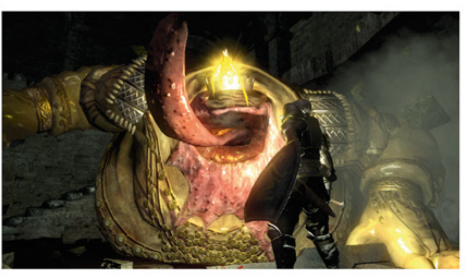




For Kajii, the development process was unlike any other he's been involved in as a videogame producer. "It was so refreshing to visit the team; the atmosphere was so different," he explains. "The work was extremely hard, but there also seemed to be a sense that the team were impatient to play the final product"




The faith placed in *Demon's Souls* by Miyazaki (left) and Kajii paid off. The game gets it chance to make a mark in Europe on June 25




Surprisingly, Miyazaki had never held a level design role on a project before *Demon's Souls*, and his hands-on, adaptive approach is unusual in Japanese development. "Every single day I would be like: 'Make this door taller! Take this wall out!' I could not have made this game with any other team!"

controls aren't based on any familiar scheme. Only a handful of players finished the demo. Some even put the controller down at the character-creation screen, which was particularly disheartening."

In part, this alienation derived from the slow pacing of the game, which, in its condition that players think before acting, requires some adjustment. While many claim the game is difficult, in reality it's just unforgiving. For those who approach the game with the correct mindset, it's both fair and rewarding. Fool rush in. "We were sure we went too far in this," says Miyazaki. "The team kept waiting for Sony to tell us to rethink our approach but that instruction never came." Kajii explains: "At Sony we try to deliver games that can touch the widest possible number of users, so there was a critical decision to be made: do we to ask From Software to make the game more accessible, or do we let the team pursue the creative road it set for this project? Of course, we chose the latter and, mercifully, it was the right decision." But the decision was not a wholly altruistic one, as Kajii admits: "In truth,

"This is not the kind of game that companies can generally afford to make without a perfect storm of good timing, skilled individuals and management willingness to take risks"

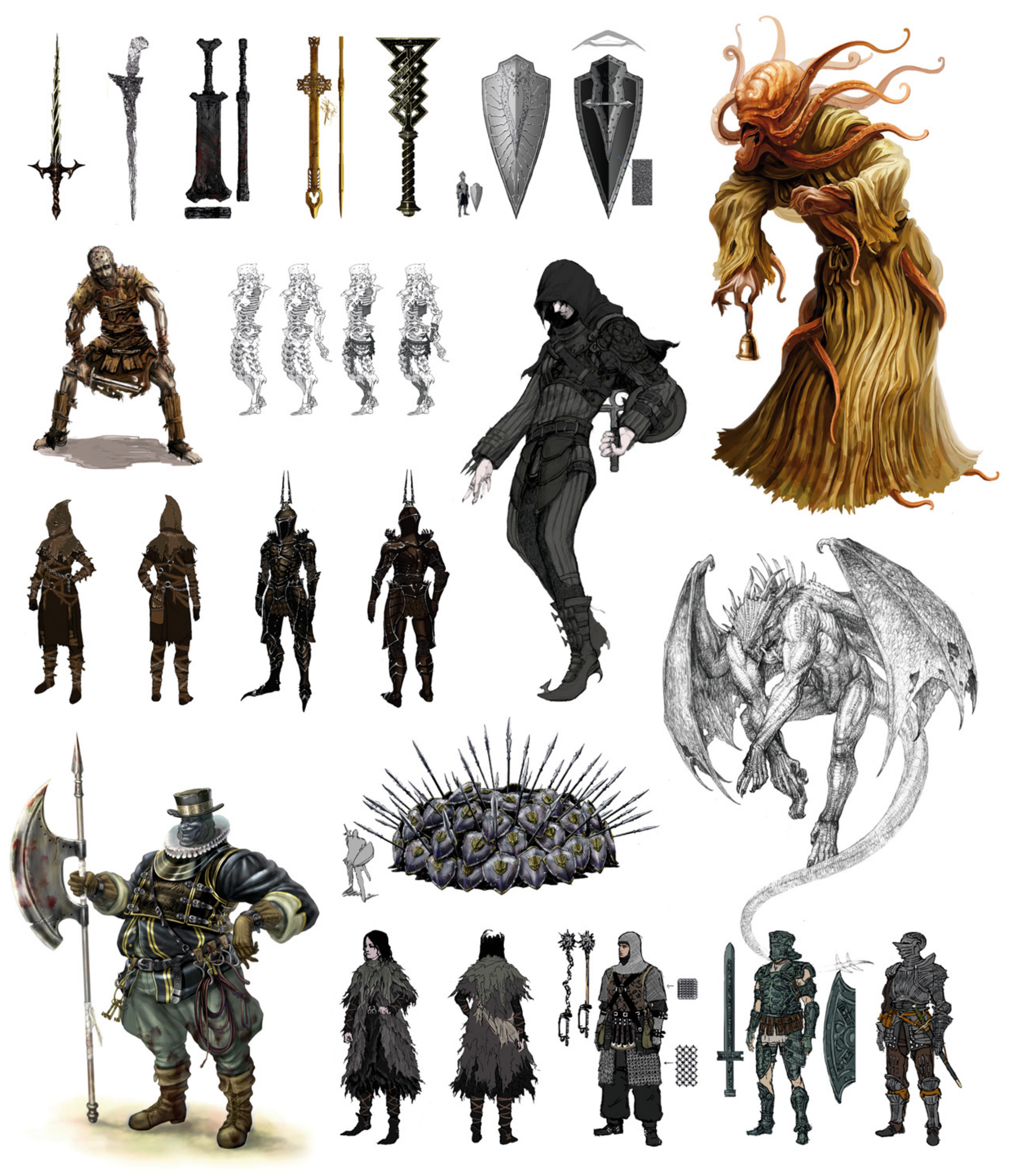
that we could allow the project such creative freedom was thanks to fortunate timing and release schedules. In that sense, we were lucky. This is not the kind of game that companies can generally afford to make without a perfect storm of good timing, skilled individuals and management willingness to take a risk."

The theme of risk permeates the game itself, where players are constantly tested, and the stakes are continually raised. "Initially the plan was to have the game feature perma-death, where death of the character would result in the save file being erased," Kajii laughs. "We all agreed we probably went too far with that. But it demonstrates the lengths we went to in exploring the meaning and mechanisms of death in the game when tuning that rewarding feeling the game was supposed to provide." Miyazaki agrees: "It is not a game in which you die a lot, but an experience that keeps you very aware of your surroundings and tests your knowledge of its contents and system constantly. In the game, armour and weapons are not made for showing off, but for their stats and usefulness. We really wanted players to focus on that part of the game, to feel the joy of having defeated challenges because they made the right choices. But to get to this point, you need failures, failures from which you learn."

"Our approach was really to try to sidestep preset narrative," explains Kajii. "There is no real story unfolding in front of you. Rather the experience is all about you and the choices you're making step by step. In a sense I feel like the game returns to the approach of early videogames where you're anxious at every step. You feel as if death and failure are watching over your shoulder all the time, but that is tempered by the sense of intense joy when you surpass a challenge. Those very human feelings are what we wanted to explore in *Demon's Souls*, and that's where the 'fun' lies."

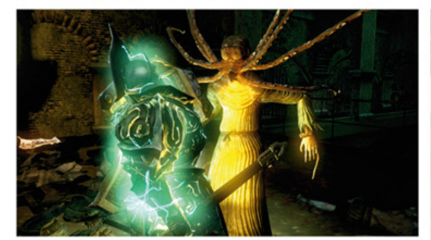
From the first blueprint laid down by the design team, *Demon's Souls* changed very little.

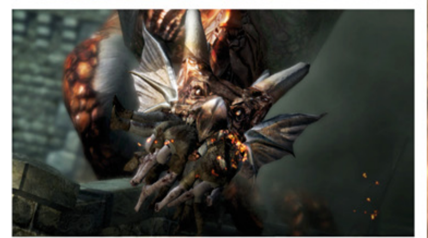












Miyazaki has no shortage of features he wants to include in a sequel, explaining that he has "a ton of new systems, types of magic, maps, network elements and even story elements that were dropped due to time and budget restraints." Given the success of the first game, such budgetary problems shouldn't affect a potential follow-up



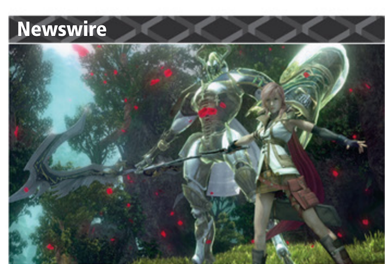
Even the innovative network features that allow players to leave one another clues and hints – such as in-game FAQs pasted to the environment – or to see where and how other players died via ghostly replays were set from the beginning. Nevertheless, these features were the most difficult part of selling the vision to Sony. "So many people queried why we needed an online aspect to the game if we weren't planning on allowing people to form a traditional questing party," explains Kajii. "Because it's the standard use of the network today, it's hard to come up with something that bucks that. We were interested in a singleplayer experience from the start. The online side exists only to enhance that. But it was a real challenge to justify that, as maintaining servers is expensive for a publisher."

Miyazaki agrees: "At a certain point, we realised it was just too difficult to explain why we needed servers in our singleplayer game. We tried everything, even using pictures. But the core concepts are so unusual it's extremely difficult to explain. You need to experience the game to appreciate the approach. It has none of the great graphics that are shown today on high-spec games, no gigantic combos with awesome special effects. *Demon's Souls*' greatest asset is the experience, and that can only be experienced to be appreciated."

Perhaps for this reason, *Demon's Souls* failed to perform in the way the team had hoped at release. "Initially, sales were poor," says Kajii. "We sold between 20-30,000 copies in Japan the first week and, as the first feedback we had during development from TGS was not so good, we were really disappointed and worried that the project was going to fail. As a developer you immediately slip into a new mode of thinking, wondering if things would have been different if we'd focused on different features. It was a hard time." However, it wasn't long before word of mouth began to turn the game's fortunes around. "The contrast between how we felt around the time of release and when the game broke the 100,000 sales mark was gigantic," says Miyazaki.

Kajii sees the trend in development away from risk-taking projects such as *Demon's Souls* as a problem for the industry, but is not pessimistic. "It is understandable that you want low risks in sure-win projects. So in recent years marketing has taken a much bigger role in defining what types of games are developed. There is little place for anything new and, as development costs rise, so the pie is just getting smaller. From a marketing perspective, *Demon's Souls* is a project that should never have been initiated. But I have the feeling now that if you are solid in your ideas, design and process you can succeed. I hope that *Demon's Souls* has become evidence that an original title, one with a very different approach from the norm, can receive recognition and success. I want to believe this game is helping to bring about a change in that thinking, that its success and recognition is going to pave the way for other original titles to be developed and noticed."

Newswire



Square Enix amasses some serious gil

For the year ending March 31, 2010, Square Enix reported financial results worth grinding for. The one-million sellers spearheading the success are *Final Fantasy XIII*, *Dragon Quest IX: Sentinels Of The Starry Skies*, *Batman: Arkham Asylum*, *Kingdom Hearts 358/2 Days* and *Dragon Quest VI*. Though a sales drop is expected for the year up to March 31, 2011, this is still a success story for a publisher based in a region that has been struggling with change. It's a reminder that Japanese IP can still attract huge audiences and generate hefty profit thanks to the unwavering commitment of a big, confident publisher.

INTERVIEW

From Warsaw with love

We talk about hex, death and QTEs as The Witcher 2 sees Geralt of Rivia back in action

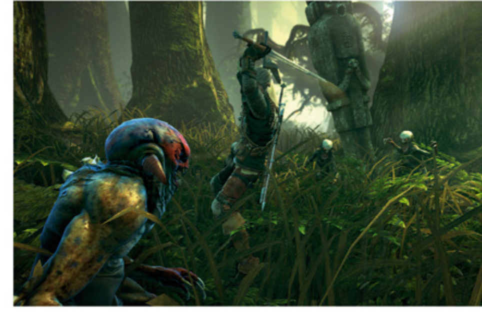
The sequel to Polish RPG *The Witcher* is a bid to continue the story, and correct some of the mistakes, of its predecessor. With branching dialogue and realtime battles, the game may have literary roots but draws on more traditional action-RPG influences. But that hasn't stopped CD Projekt's development arm, Red, from adding some of its own spice to the broth and overhauling the game's combat along the way. Producer **Tomasz Gop** explains the process.

Was there any trepidation about bringing the sequel to a game that was initially controversial to the western market?
I'm going to be straight: we sold enough copies [of *The Witcher*] to be confident that controversial didn't mean bad. People bought it anyway. And they liked it. It wasn't like they bought it to see the "airport scene", to kill people. They liked the story. The story is definitely the strongest part and we have the same team writing the sequel. The outro to *The Witcher* clearly shows that we already had an idea for *The Witcher 2*.

Does taking Andrzej Sapkowski's books as your basis restrict the creative process?
Not at all. Whenever we want we invent our own monsters and introduce our own characters. But still, the world that Sapkowski created is so big that we're not even utilising ten per cent of it.

The original *Witcher* was revamped after release – how has that process affected your approach to the sequel?
We released the enhanced version of *The Witcher* – free for existing players – around a year after the original launch. It was based on feedback from the community. For us it meant the equivalent of a director's cut and a community cut combined. It was proof that we do everything we can to fix issues that bother [the audience]. Every game that a developer makes is supposed to be a director's cut; when you're making a game you're thinking of everything. But then it gets released and millions of people see it and come up with new ideas that come to you from feedback.





"When you're making a game you're thinking of everything, but then it gets released and millions of people see it and come up with new ideas that come to you from feedback"

Gop's team is currently uninterested in the online social connectivity boom. Its focus is on Geralt of Rivia's journey and further realising Andrzej Sapkowski's fantasy series

QTEs are normally associated with console games – why did you choose to translate this divisive mechanic on to PC?
Despite what people think, it's not about us trying to appeal to console players. You're making a boss fight and at a certain point you need a new element. We prototyped about ten ideas. The QTE felt right for certain moments so we added it. It's not like we've totally changed the fights with huge opponents, it's not QTE-based, it's not like we're making a 'console' version of *The Witcher*. It's fun to add something new. It's for the gameplay.

What are the influences on the visual style of *The Witcher*?
We try to connect [*The Witcher*] to Slavic culture, to some of the legends of the Slavic and Nordic lands. In the first *Witcher* elves have some garments from classical, traditional Polish mountaineers. Some of the costumes for the Order of the Flaming Rose were based on ancient Polish

OUT THERE



TACTICAL INSERTION

While *Trauma Team* (see p103) aims to educate as it entertains, British indie developer Mad Cow Studios intends to boldly go into the human anatomy with its tongue firmly in its cheek. *Privates* is a twin-stick shooter set in the human body, specifically the anus and vagina, and it's your job – as a "condom-hatted marine" – to clean up the infections riddling our nation's nether regions.

Developed with Channel 4 funding, the target is Xbox Live Arcade and the sort of toilet humour not seen since *Conker's Bad Fur Day*. The description of "gorgeous 3D locations" may be plumbing depths we'd prefer not to see in too much detail, however.

zombie-cow.com/privates



The addition of QTEs to the gameplay in *The Witcher 2* has raised some eyebrows (and a few hackles), but Gop denies that their inclusion is simply to appeal to console gamers. A console version of the game is planned but not confirmed, though the use of a 360 controller in our presentation could tell us something

history. We have a lot to draw on. The concern is to do it right and in context.

Central and eastern European regions have produced some interesting regionally flavoured titles recently.
I'm a big fan of the *Stalker* series. It had something that appealed to me in that it was a shooter combined with exploration and development; there was some economy. It was a great mix. And there was the Russian thing – the vodka and so on. I could feel the cold, the dark, the atmosphere.

You're putting sex scenes in *The Witcher 2* – how do you feel they fit into the general experience of a videogame?
Heavy Rain did a great job and proved what we always knew – that if you do it right no one talks about "boobs" in a game, they talk about real sex between real adults. If it's suitable to show a sex scene at a certain point, if we think a character should get together with another, it should be bound to the story and derive from it. That's why we're not showing it as collectible cards this time.

Do you plan to make as many games as there are Witcher books?
[Smiles] If you play *The Witcher 2* to the end, you'll know if we plan to do the next…



Continue

E3 drinks
See you at the stinky old Saddle Ranch, eh?

Stylus XL
Real men use a real stylus to pet their Nintendogs

Fourplayer *Blur*
Just like the good old days. Pass the Quatro

Quit

Wii Speak
What? What? What? What? What? [Silence]

PSP nub fatigue
A barnstormer like *Peace Walker* brings it all back

E3 schedules
Suddenly, three days doesn't look like enough



"It's astonishing how much money Activision had to pay to cover up its horns and pitchforks with a halo."
Bobby Schwartz, attorney for Infinity Ward co-founders Jason West and Vince Zampella, gives the fire a good poke

"Double The Balls, Twice The Fun!"
Assyria Game Studio plugs its latest with simple maths

"More people have played *FarmVille* than have played *Mario*."
Bill Mooney, vice president of *Farmville* developer Zynga, might be getting a little carried away

"I've been busy prepping for my possible Supreme Court nomination by re-watching The Wire and then just this morning I wake up and hear that Obama has nominated some 'lawyer' to fill the opening. When will this kind of preferential treatment end? It's the legal elite trying to keep the common man from the highest court in the land. What are they so afraid of? *DeathSpank* maybe?"
You just can't keep **Ron Gilbert** down

"It seems there is an erotic doujinshi of Bayonetta… There are fans that find that sort of thing unpleasant, and I don't think it can possibly show any sort of love for the game."
Platinum Games' **Hideki Kamiya** doesn't like people playing with Bayonetta in an icky way

"This game doesn't look nearly so shit when you're pished."
A Scottish friend, who shall remain nameless, sees a different side of *Monster Hunter 3*

"We were pleased with the performance of *Beatles: Rock Band* but we were expecting higher sales. Our core audience of 16 to 34-year-old males are much more familiar with Green Day music than The Beatles… Green Day probably has a much higher awareness than perhaps The Beatles did."
MTV Games' **Scott Guthrie** tells it like it is

"First off, if Green Day outsells The Beatles, I'm going to stab myself. That's just a personal aside."
Dubious Quality blogger and *Rock Band* fan **Bill Harris** prefers his guitar-based music delivered with a mop top



RETAIL

After the gold rush

As profits plummet and heads roll in the boardroom, the UK's biggest high street game retailer faces uncertain times. Can Game weather the storm?

As trend-bucking retail success stories go, Game's meteoric rise to high street heavyweight status is a good one. From humble beginnings as Future Zone back in 1991, it has grown into an international retail empire with stores in France, Spain, Portugal, Australia, Norway, Sweden, Ireland and the Czech Republic. In the five years up to 2009, the group has seen annual revenues soar from £577,000 to £1.97m and its store base multiply from 567 to 1,335.

"If a customer wants to buy hardware, unless they buy accessories and our warranty, the sale will work against our targets. I know stores turn away customers because of this"

However, it seems Game was flying a little too close to the sun over the last 12 months. Year-on-year profits have plummeted by £34m, sales are down ten per cent and share earnings slumped by a grim 28 per cent, leading to the departure of CEO Lisa Morgan and chief operating officer Terry Scicluna. To stop the rot, interim CEO Chris Bell has announced a comprehensive set of shop closures: 43 stores and concessions have already been jettisoned and a further 127 are due to cease trading by December 2013.

So, what went wrong? Game Group UK's managing director **Martyn Gibbs** remains bullish, implicating market factors beyond the company's control. "We're specialist games retailers, so our performance always has to be viewed in the context of the wider market, which was down compared to the record-breaking numbers in 2008," he says. "Everyone at Game Group worked incredibly hard to mitigate the market decline."

However, **Matt Piner**, senior retail analyst at Verdict Research, suspects the source of the firm's strife runs deeper. "I imagine Game were expecting weak figures because of how the market has been going, but they were particularly bad," he tells us. "Online sales fell by nine per cent. You'd really have expected to see growth there. With such a strong brand, there's no reason why they shouldn't keep up with the likes of Play.com."

On top of the store closures, Bell has pledged to invest £10m in Game's online operations, with





From left: Martyn Gibbs is managing director of videogame retailer Game Group UK, Gennaro Castaldo is head of press and PR at high street giant HMV, and Matt Piner is a senior retail analyst at Verdict Research, which has scrutinised retail in the UK for over 20 years









Recent big sellers include ***Final Fantasy XIII*** **(top),** ***Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*** **(above left) and the MotionPlus-powered** ***Wii Sports Resort*****. Many of the sales of these games will have been on the high street, but online sales continue to eat into traditional market share**

plans to launch a new international web platform and a social networking service, but it could be a case of too little, too late. Online sales currently make up only five per cent of Game's business.

Possible futures include a takeover. "They've pledged to close over 120 stores by the end of 2013 but they will need to close even more than that," says Piner. "I wouldn't be surprised if part of the strategy would be to align themselves for a takeover bid. The most likely candidate is [US chain] GameStop – a name that's been bandied around for some time – but with Game's current outlook looking so unwieldy, I think it's unlikely."

While Game has floundered, the real problem is that its competition hasn't. HMV, its biggest high street rival, has seen its game offering blossom. "What we've done is step back and try to understand what it is that our games customers really want and expect from us, so that these challenges can become opportunities," explains HMV's press chief **Gennaro Castaldo**. The company has sown the seeds of a useful digital strategy in collaboration with the 7digital download service, rolled out the new Gamerbase online gaming centres, secured a number of impressive in-store exclusives and expanded its pre-owned Re/Play service.

In comparison, Game's recent efforts to expand its business seem limp and, in some cases, dangerously complacent. "Initially they were confident that they didn't need to enter into a head-to-head price battle with supermarkets and that they'd compete in other ways – loyalty cards and so forth. That clearly hasn't worked out and they're really losing the faith of customers," insists Piner. "New hardware will be a very welcome boost and, as a specialist, they're particularly well placed to benefit because consumers will be looking for guidance. But it'll be a limited boost and not long term. Their problems with online, with the digital shift and with the [supermarkets] will remain."

While Morgan and Scicluna both left with handsome golden goodbyes, those feeling the pinch the hardest are employees on the shop floors. Staff face redundancy or decreased working hours, which could compromise customer service, the one thing that Game can boast about over its online competitors. "All bonus schemes have been cut for management and hours are really tight," one store manager (who wished to remain anonymous) told us. "Morale is obviously low, with staff losing hours to the point where it just isn't worth working. I, as with a lot of Game staff, actually found out [about the cuts] online before we heard anything through the store itself. Managers are finding themselves having to work a lot of extra hours for free just to get the jobs done that need doing, but it's the sales assistants who have been hit hardest and treated as though they really don't matter."

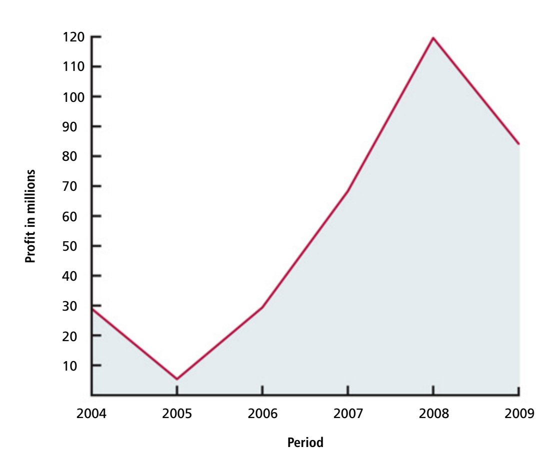
He goes on to point the finger for Game's predicament squarely at mismanagement. "The key performance indicators we're set hold us back from making sales on the shop floor. If a customer wants to buy hardware, unless they buy accessories and our GameCare extended warranty, the sale will actually work against our targets. I know most stores turn away customers because of this. It's crazy."

There are tough times ahead for employees, then, and some nervous collar-loosening for the executives next time they sit down with the shareholders. Can the company turn things around? Gibbs, for one, believes it can. "Consumers like to have a one-stop shop where they know they'll get good advice and can find everything they need. We've spent two decades doing this role for the videogames industry, its customers and suppliers. We love the products and we'd like to be doing it for another two decades, and hopefully more."

Piner, on the other hand, isn't so optimistic. "Game will probably still be here in five years, but it's going to be a very tough five years."

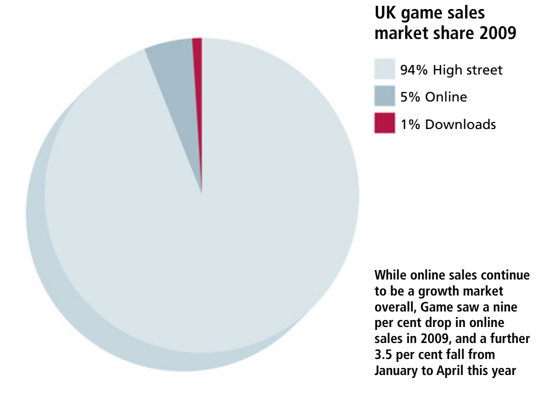
Retail in need of therapy

Charting Game's fall from grace



Since Game announced its 2009 financial results, things haven't picked up. Between January 31 and April 17, sales were down a further 20.8 per cent

UK game sales market share 2009



While online sales continue to be a growth market overall, Game saw a nine per cent drop in online sales in 2009, and a further 3.5 per cent fall from January to April this year

WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

A blog devoted to "the best damn things this side of Hyrule: video games and booze", The Drunken Moogle aims to sprinkle some pixels into your cocktail shaker. There's a variety of themed drinks from a range of sources and, perhaps best of all, it manages to mirror in flavour the tone of your favourite – or most despised – games. In the mood for the hard, dry kick of a night at Hotel Dusk? Try one shot bourbon, one shot Wild Turkey with a stem of mint. How about a T-Virus antidote? There's a drink for that, too. Some of the mixes also serve the secondary purpose of temporarily wiping your bad memories. Thank you, the 'Shadow the Hedgehog' (one oz Grenadine, two oz Morgan's Spiced).





Beat generation

Beatnik games was blowing up robotic ninjas – now it's dabbling with science and working with Move

Fresh from the release of debut PC title *Plain Sight*, independent London-based developer Beatnik Games is working on *Ada*, an educational, browser-based adventure and puzzle game in conjunction with Channel 4 with the aim of convincing teenagers not to give up studying physics. We talk to studio head **Robin Lacey** about Beatnik's aims for *Ada* and the future of both *Plain Sight* and the studio.

> **"Move could potentially give players the opportunity to play the game with a level of precision control which you couldn't actually achieve on a keyboard and mouse"**

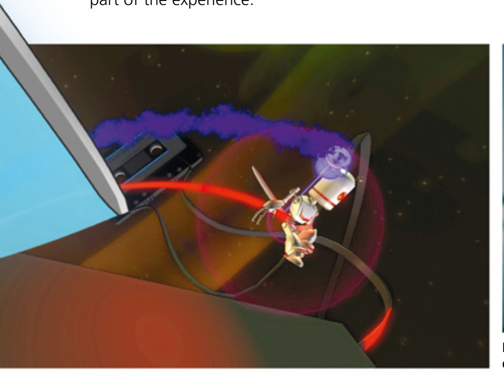
How was the launch of *Plain Sight*?
Launch night was terrifying as the shit hit the fan straight away. There was a bug that meant people couldn't upgrade properly. We were in the office until 4:30am and managed to get a patch out within something like four hours. And then our patch didn't work, so it was chaos.

Is one of the risks of being a small studio that bugs like that can slip through?
I think so – we don't do QA quite as well as the other guys because we're a small team, but we do push out patches. It's great to be able to do that because you don't have to spend 20 grand on QA, but at the same time I think you could get sloppy. I think the problem is that a lot of indies price their games like they've gone through QA. Our game's $10, so if it's a bit buggy but still a fun game then that's kind of part of the experience.

So how did you move from producing *Plain Sight* to *Ada*, which is aimed at a more mainstream audience?
A person we work with put us in touch with Alice Taylor [commissioning editor for education at Channel 4]. At first we were thinking they might want us to do a sort of BBC-style curriculum-based education game, but she was really interested in hearing our ideas. So we came back to them with this idea about getting young people, specifically girls, into science.

Why science?
Very few people getting high grades at GCSE go on to do science at A-level – they just don't want to do it, for some bizarre reason. And we felt that games provided a perfect medium for scientific discovery. Learning and discovery is essentially what games are in their most basic form. And we wanted to do this in a way that was incredibly subtle because we hated stuff which is really in-your-face educational. And Channel 4 were 100 per cent behind that. They're really against obviously educational stuff – they're into subtle, soft learning, so people could play it and never know it's an educational game.

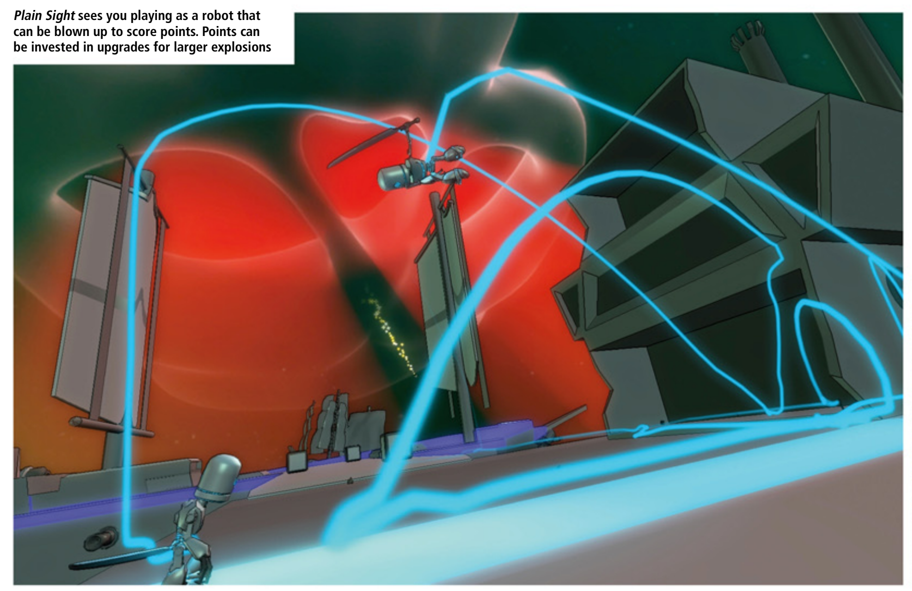
How easy have you found the transition from producing your first game completely independently to working with Channel 4?
They behave like a client, not a publisher. The way Channel 4 see it is like: "You guys make games and that's what you're good at," so they let us do our thing. And as a game developer you can't actually ask more than that. We have a games

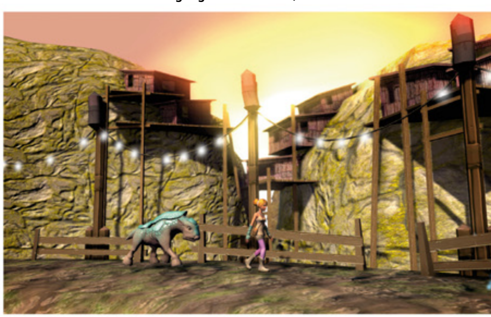




Beatnik Games' Lacey (above) claims to have founded the indie developer after "a particularly drunken night out". Easily done




Plain Sight sees you playing as a robot that can be blown up to score points. Points can be invested in upgrades for larger explosions


Ada is a working title for Beatnik's educational game, and is inspired by Ada Lovelace, the daughter of Lord Byron who is regarded as the world's first computer programmer thanks to her work with Charles Babbage. And if that's not a role model who'll get girls into science, we don't know what is

consultant they've hired, who comes round and helps out, but they never turn around and say: "This is a game mechanic that I demand you put in". So you know they're very accessible and quite frankly really awesome to work with.

Visually, *Ada* seems very different from *Plain Sight*. Did you always intend such a departure for your next project?
Part of the reason *Plain Sight* has the style it does is because it was mostly programmer art until quite a way into the project, so we wanted to let our artists get their teeth into something. Also, as a studio, you don't want to be constantly making the same thing. I hope that after *Ada* our next project will probably be totally different as well. But perhaps one day we'll work out what we're really, really good at making and try and make the ultimate version of that.

In the meantime you'll be returning to *Plain Sight*, which is going to be released on PSN.
Yes, as an exclusive, with Move controls.

Why are you going down that route?
The precision. Remember when the Wii was first announced and you bought *Red Steel*, it was like, "I'm finally able to play firstperson shooters the way I always wanted to!" And then you play it and you're like, "Oh, this is rubbish." I think the precision the Move gives allows you to achieve that. It also addressed something we spent a lot of time working with – *Plain Sight*'s targeting mechanic, which is automatic on PC. What we're excited about with Move is that it could potentially give players the opportunity to play the game with a level of precision control which you couldn't actually achieve on a keyboard and mouse.

Will it be exclusively Move based?
No, we're going to make it so there'll be standard controls as well. But what we'd like is to divide the controller players and Move players apart because that would be ideal.

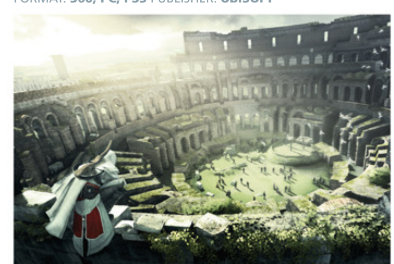


How have you found working with Sony?
They're only just down the road so we got a response from them straight away and they're charitable, which is amazing. I think Sony treat independent game developers differently. Microsoft, they made the Indie Games Channel, which is basically a bunch of really low-standard games with an indie label. Sony have the Pub Fund, and they pay for development costs. So I think the two different companies have very different attitudes towards indies. I think Microsoft just treat indies like, "Aw, isn't this novel? These guys!" and Sony are like, "Oh, you're actually making good games – let's encourage and support this." And I think that when you run a business, you have to go with the people who you think are going to make the most financial sense for you and your staff. I do know guys in the States who have kind of the opposite experience, because Sony for them are miles away and Microsoft are ideally placed.

INCOMING

Assassin's Creed Brotherhood

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3** PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**



Hopefully more Back To The Future: Part III than Pirates Of The Caribbean: At World's End, this rolling sequel adds multiplayer featuring "wide-ranging" characters, weapons and techniques

God Of War: Ghost Of Sparta

FORMAT: **PSP** PUBLISHER: **SCEE**



Break out the duster and brace your thumbs: Ready At Dawn has another quest for your PSP. Like *Chains Of Olympus*, this one adds another chapter (if not another dimension) to the story of Kratos

Hydro Thunder Hurricane

FORMAT: **360** PUBLISHER: **VECTOR UNIT**



Another excuse to write 'Dreamcast' in the magazine, courtesy of this XBLA sequel to the cult coin-op conversion. Modes this time include Ring Master (slalom) and Gauntlet (exploding barrels)

Unnamed FlatOut Wii Game

FORMAT: **WII** PUBLISHER: **ZOO GAMES**



From the maker of *Calvin Tucker's Farm Animal Racing*, advertised by a website that seldom makes any sense, it's Team6's version of Bugbear's racer. One of the announced modes: "Racing"

Tom Clancy's HAWX 2

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3, Wii** PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**



Those blazing angels at Ubisoft Bucharest are at it again, the sequel "directly inspired" by Clancy's books. We know the feeling, having been directly inspired to read books by someone else

TrackMania Wii

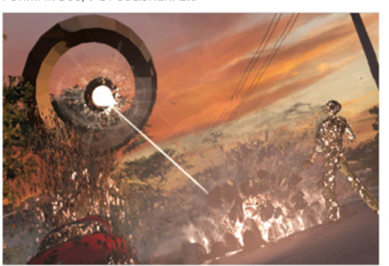
FORMAT: **Wii** PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**



Surely the name should be *TrackMania Wheeeee!* Regardless, a new track editor trailer bodes well for this rare jump to console, series loyalist FireBrand including over 1,000 building blocks

XCOM

FORMAT: **360, PC** PUBLISHER: **2K**



2K dares to imagine an FPS version of the classic top-down game, the job of making it going to *BioShock 2* dev 2K Marin. No details yet, just one of the weirdest announcement screens ever

Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney

FORMAT: **IPHONE, IPOD TOUCH** PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**



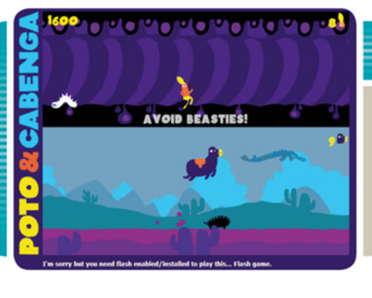
A series that can't possibly object to a touchscreen, all five GBA games will make their way on to Apple's devices with a new 'flick' interface to make organising evidence that little bit easier

Dragon Quest IX

FORMAT: **DS** PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**



From the co-developer of *Transformers: Revenge Of The Fallen* – make of that what you will. At least the trailer blows the dust of FASA's dormant series, collapsing the odd building in the process



INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

www.potoandcabenga.com

Honeyslug may be carving out territory on the App Store and PSN, but that hasn't stopped the independent studio paying some dues to the Flash gaming scene with the side-scrolling tag-team of rider (Cabenga) and steed (Poto), brought to life for the One Button Game competition at this year's GDC.

Though visually derivative of *LocoRoco's* block colouring, the real draw is the twist that comes after the tutorial. Separated by the snapping jaws of a flying beastie, Cabenga takes the top level of the screen and Poto the lower. Holding the space bar speeds up Poto but slows down Cabenga, releasing it the opposite. The same is applied to jumping – Cabenga is launched skywards at the first press, with Poto leaping upon its release. What results is a strategic platformer that keeps you guessing while incrementally upping the ante with foes that can – and can't – be squashed under your heels and hooves. It's a triumph of plotting and pace in its five short minutes, simplicity subverted by a cunning gimmick that produces challenge without crossing the line into frustration.


CRACKDOWN 2
OUT 9TH JULY
Vigilantes and night-crawling mutants are tearing Pacific City apart. It's up to you and your friends to bring justice by any means necessary. Unique multiplayer action leaps to explosive new heights in Crackdown® 2, with support for four-player cooperative campaigns and up to 16-player competitive action.
For exclusive videos, go to xbox.com/crackdown2
Xbox LIVE Gold membership required for online multiplayer.
XBOX LIVE
15

In association with Screen Digest

Social engagement

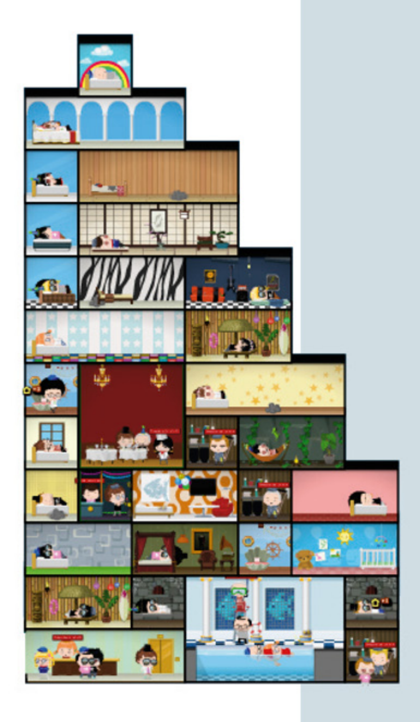
Screen Digest's Steve Bailey looks at why Facebook gaming has to shrink to grow

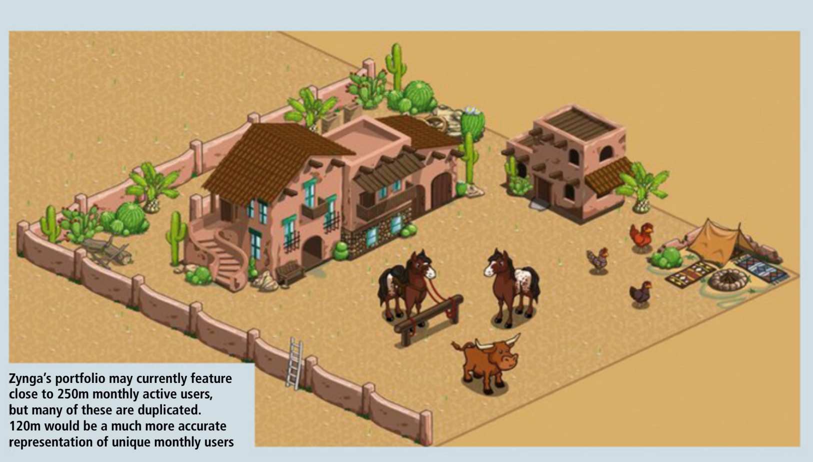
Much has been made of the explosion of activity in social network gaming over the past year, centred largely on the record-breaking quantities of monthly and daily users that have been playing via the Facebook platform [see p76 for more]. At the moment, much is also being made of the impact that changes to Facebook's operations are having on gaming activity, as social functions that enable a game to achieve viral distribution have been muffled. It's hardly the beginning of the end, but it is the end of the beginning, and necessarily so. Given that the growth of social gaming can only outpace the growth of the social network itself for so long, it has to begin decelerating at some point.

No matter how eagerly social networks are embracing gaming, there's an inevitable tension in the relationship that's come to the fore in recent times

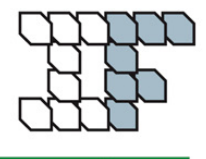
No matter how eagerly social networks are embracing gaming, there's an inevitable tension in the relationship that's come to the fore in recent times, typified by Facebook. While social networks operate in very close conjunction with the open web, many essentially remain closed platforms, and are ultimately defined by the platform owner. The tension in this hierarchy is currently being felt on two separate fronts where gaming on Facebook is concerned: distribution and monetisation.

Facebook's further tightening of notifications, news feeds and alert systems was inevitable. Formerly, many social games thrived on this function, whereby users' news streams would receive updates every time they achieved a milestone in the game they were playing. Given how intensely this feature was taken advantage of by some operators, it came dangerously close to being seen as a form of spam, especially since many users are unaware of what they are agreeing to when they allow a game access to their profile when installing the app. And so, given the impact on the user experience of overbearing implementation of this feature, it's imperative that Facebook mutes such noise. This isn't the first time it has taken action of major consequence to social gaming – last year, the 'Scamville' saga saw Facebook demand that companies tighten their regulations with regard to the promotional offers that were placed alongside traditional payment methods for virtual currency purchase. If any



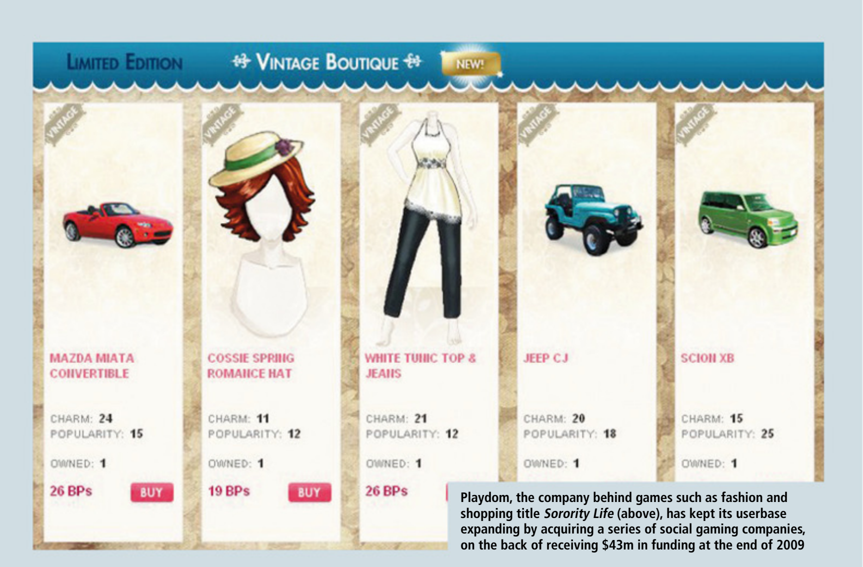


Zynga's portfolio may currently feature close to 250m monthly active users, but many of these are duplicated. 120m would be a much more accurate representation of unique monthly users

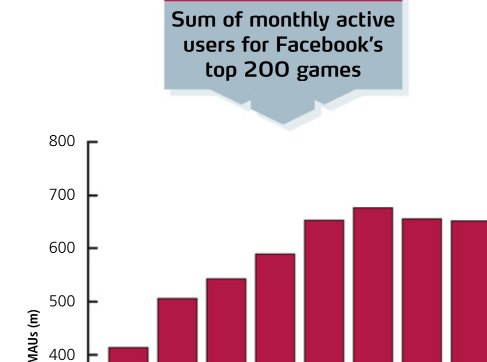




www.screendigest.com



Playdom, the company behind games such as fashion and shopping title *Sorority Life* (above), has kept its userbase expanding by acquiring a series of social gaming companies, on the back of receiving $43m in funding at the end of 2009



Source: Screen Digest interpretation of Facebook data

future activity from social gaming companies has a perceived negative impact on user experience, we can obviously expect Facebook to continue to take action. This toning down of viral spread has had a direct effect on the number of monthly active users of the biggest games and operators. It's disruptive for existing operators, but arguably necessary for social gaming's long-term health.

The other loggerhead is monetisation. Facebook is gradually introducing its own virtual currency, Facebook Credits, and we expect it to become de facto at some point within the next year. These credits take a higher revenue share (30 per cent) of transactions than existing thirdparty payment solution providers (around ten to 15 per cent), but are expected to lower friction in the payment process and encourage more players to convert to paying customers, due to Facebook Credits representing a trusted, site-wide wallet for users. If any established social gaming company were to withdraw from Facebook on the basis of having to adopt this Credits system, it would speak more of the margins involved in their operations than anything else. It's not as if such companies don't already realise how vulnerable they are to the requirements of Facebook itself.

So, Facebook gaming is maturing, and needs to slow somewhat before it can pick up the pace once more. But there's also one more question to be asked of the remainder of 2010: was *FarmVille* a social gaming sweet spot that's unlikely to be repeated for quite some time? Resource management is a great fit for gaming on social networks, as exemplified by farming games. Farming is a slight misnomer, as such games are more about gardening – pruning, tinkering and accumulating – than farming, and at a pace that perfectly complements the fact that Facebook users are logged in to do much more than play games, but enjoy the absorption as part of such multitasking. Farm-style settings are the trump card of resource management, in terms of context of content, offering an appeal and accessibility that open them up to all genders and ages, and even nationalities. While *FarmVille* has been the rising-star icon for Facebook gaming these past six months, other farming games have also seen great success on other social networks in other parts of the world, such as China, India and Russia. The appeal here is proven to be global. Resource management is now moving on from farms and into hotels, cities and even hospitals, with varying degrees of success, but none seem to be on track to replicate the reach of comfort-food gardening that is farm-based gaming. And so, the shadow cast by *FarmVille* will likely be another growing pain for Facebook gaming to weather, making 2010 as much about maturation and transition as 2009, but built on the back of slower, more stable growth.



Publishing giant EA is yet to make the most of new acquisition Playfish, the maker of ***Hotel City*** (above), but upcoming joint effort ***FIFA Superstars*** may indicate how much room for sports and big-brand games there is on Facebook

SOMETHING ABOUT Japan

What's wrong with this game?

Christophe Kagotani discovers why games we take for granted are viewed differently in Japan



"What the hell? I died, again! What's wrong with this game?"

The boy shouting with frustration is a member of a group of Japanese students, part of what I like to call the emerging *Modern Warfare* generation. He and a few others are taking part in an online *Battlefield: Bad Company 2* event. As he's pointed out, he's just died, again, and he's not alone. He respawns on the map and starts to wander around and then… bang, headshot, dead. Of course he gets annoyed.

The population of firstperson shooter fans in Japan is not big, numbering around 60,000 people or so, most of whom are 'Yoge' (Japanese fans of western games). That 60,000 is made up of roughly 70 per cent PS3 owners and 30 per cent Xbox 360. Compared to the west, then, it may appear as though there isn't much of a market for the genre. But when a game is identified as a phenomenon, it tends to get much more attention from Japanese gamers.

With combined sales nearing 350,000 copies, *Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare* did well in Japan, very well in fact. Its sequel has been similarly successful, with around 320,000 copies sold so far. Only a small proportion of these purchasers can be accounted for by the dedicated FPS-lover market, which means that a group of players who didn't consider themselves FPS fans have bought the game. They played it and were left wanting more, as today their focus is shifting to *Bad Company 2*.

The *Modern Warfare* generation are the young men and women for whom games have always been a part of life. They did not experience the gaming revolution in realtime and aren't as invested in the specifically Japanese franchises and genres which built the previous generations. They are often more open to new things, and the rise of the FPS may be a result of this. Yet the multiplayer conventions of the western FPS have been something of a culture shock for Japanese gamers

The world of online shooters is well established outside Japan, and people tend to be unforgiving to newcomers. Japanese players are going to have to get used to chatting over a headset using the little English they know

FPS + Online = Win. It's a simple formula from a western perspective. But whereas, for Japanese gamers, being a charismatic hero in a hostile environment, saving the day with a blazing AK-47 is fun, the same can't be said for being tossed unprepared on to a networked battlefield. Japanese gamers find it harder to adapt, like the group of high school students I'm watching. "Am I bad at this? Where is the experience system?" one turns and asks me, presumably because my white-guy face makes me an authority on the subject.

The problem here isn't their ability to play, or the game itself. It's the concept these people have of gaming. Japanese gamers are used to being the hero of an epic story with gentle introductions, and experience systems which define their progress through the game. In games like that, dying is the ultimate sanction, the game over. But here, dying is a fundamental part of the experience. These students are like marines sent to Vietnam, about to leap into an LZ under enemy fire. One foot on the ground and BAM!

A few learn quickly, or are inspired by watching videos. Some form groups and stick together,



watching each other's backs and planning what to do next. Others, aware they're not killing machines (yet), opt for a useful role (medic, engineer) on the battlefield, learning through watching others. The vast majority fall dead on the ground, over and over again. It doesn't get more harsh than that.

I try to explain to them that this isn't a game about single heroes but of 'infinite respawns and learning curves', and that the fun comes from learning how to play and how to coordinate. These players are not bad at all. They just don't understand the game. Japan's online gaming culture isn't as developed as in the west, though making comparisons with *Monster Hunter Portable* helps them to understand.

I start playing and they follow my lead. The frustration makes way for collective fun, and my new charges are soon celebrating their first kill. They're clearly having fun. But still, we're sitting around a table – it's simple, and feels familiar and safe, like playing *Monster Hunter* on PSP. It's far removed from playing against strangers online.

The world of online shooters is well established outside Japan, and people tend to be unforgiving to newcomers. Japanese players are going to have to get used to chatting over a headset using the little English they know, learn to shrug off rude behaviour, and get used to lag and poor server quality. And they won't necessarily be sitting at a table with friends; they'll be playing alone.

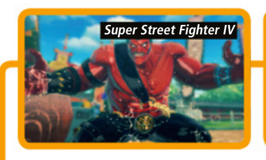
I'm not part of the *Battlefield* event, but some promotional staff are on hand to explain the game and they clearly have some understanding of online gaming. I can't help thinking that this is something western developers or their licensed publishers in Japan need to be doing in order to maximise the chances of their games' success.

The *Modern Warfare* generation is already here. My nephew is a bit young for *Bad Company 2*, yet I was surprised to see a copy of the game on his desk. His father wasn't too happy, but was forced to relent: all his friends at school have been playing the game, though mostly offline. They picked it up because they spotted it in a magazine and thought it looked cool. This is something previous generations probably wouldn't have done.

A new and growing generation of Japanese gamers is knocking at the door of western gaming culture. I hope someone will answer them kindly.



How close is playing online *Monster Hunter* to *Battlefield: Bad Company 2*? Not very to western eyes, but if it's your only experience of playing online the two feel more alike. Smack talk over your headset can still come as something of a shock, though





Weekly Famitsu Japanese sales, April 12–May 9

Game/weekly sales/lifetime sales

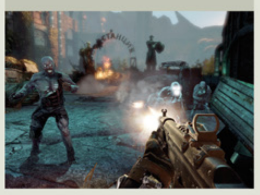
1. ***Dragon Quest Monsters: Joker 2*** (Square Enix, DS): 891,846 (NE)
2. ***Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker*** (Konami, PSP): 582,360 (NE)
3. ***New Super Mario Brothers Wii*** (Nintendo, Wii): 135,040 (3,810,933)
4. ***Nier Replicant*** (Square Enix, PS3): 100,119 (NE)
5. ***Super Street Fighter IV*** (Capcom, PS3): 96,864 (NE)
6. ***Tomodachi Collection*** (Nintendo, DS): 87,408 (3,235,122)
7. ***Mario Kart Wii*** (Nintendo, Wii): 78,747 (2,706,497)
8. ***Wii Fit Plus*** (Nintendo, Wii): 75,492 (1,843,299)
9. ***Pokémon Ranger Hikari No Kiseki*** (Nintendo, DS): 68,102 (450,567)
10. ***Pro Yakyu Spirits 2010*** (Konami, PSP): 64,588 (153,021)

Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

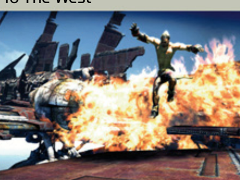
Edge's most wanted

Singularity



A sci-fi shooter might not scream originality, but ageing foes to coffin dust or regressing them to sperm soufflé suggests educational – if not entertainment – value.
360, PC, PS3, ACTIVISION

Enslaved: Odyssey To The West



Heavenly Sword looks like a minor flirtation with hack'n'slash compared to this lingering kiss. The animation and set-pieces give Drake a run for his bounty.
360, PS3, NAMCO BANDAI

Halo: Reach – Legendary Edition



Gimmick or not, we'll wear those Spartan patches with pride (um, albeit beneath a jacket, probably). Now, what to do with that *Halo 3* Legendary Edition helmet?
360, MICROSOFT

The perfect getaway

Virtual heaven or hell? The choice is (very rarely) yours



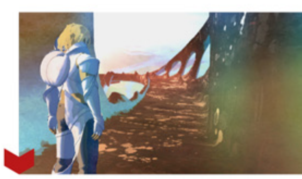
It looks set to be another good year to make a killing in videogames: but where is the love? The shock of a chilled-out cruise around *TDU2*'s Ibiza paradise makes you forget all about how many rounds there are per magazine and focus on the important things, like the view

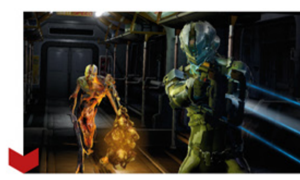
Why is it that darkness often attracts more than light? Why is Batman, the breaker of windows, more interesting to us than Superman, the boy scout? There are parallels in the videogame industry. For every Mushroom Kingdom there are a dozen scorched Earths ravaged by conflict. Our (anti-) heroes are getting more stern and grizzled with each iteration: Sam Fisher recently went rugged and started breaking necks when the world of espionage began closing in on him.

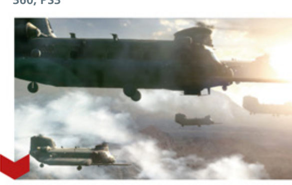
It's a pattern that doesn't seem likely to change any time soon. A glance at this issue's previews reveals a wealth of hard-boiled horror and grotesquery, from the oppressive atmosphere of Isaac Clarke's latest unplanned holiday from Hell to the skull drilling of *Dead Rising 2*. It could be argued that it's endemic, as to play is also to break and the easiest thing to break is an opponent. An enemy focused solely on your demise is an obvious way to encourage reciprocated aggression and interaction. And then something like *El Shaddai* comes along. Like only a handful of titles before it – *Ico*, *Okami* and *LostWinds* jump out – *El Shaddai* sweeps the imagination into an ethereal playground, harnessing hardware to render good rather than bad or ugly. It drives home how the power of positive imagery has become an exception in a game industry obsessed with bad news.

It's not restricted to fantasy themes, either. In stark contrast to the frequently grim, hostile depiction of the world (as seen in *COD: Black Ops* and *Kane & Lynch 2*), *Test Drive Unlimited 2* is an idyllic interpretation of our surroundings. The landscape of Ibiza has been studied for its natural beauty rather than the potential for its destruction. It's a pleasant shock that reminds you how blinkers so often come into play in the search for drama, and also how great it is to lose yourself in an open virtual world without the worry of a hit-and-run.

No one would suggest that death and conflict shouldn't be examined and explored through games, but equally it couldn't be argued that we don't need more shades of grey between the black and white. Actually, what about all the other colours, too? From where we're sitting, *TDU2*'s blue skies look particularly inviting right now.











FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **IGNITION ENTERTAINMENT**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **TBC**

El Shaddai: Ascension Of The Metatron

Ignition Entertainment enlists the help of the man who drew Okami in bringing to life the right hook of Enoch



Enoch (above) looks like a cross between Brad Pitt in Troy and an Australian soap star. His anachronistic jeans are a gift from the dapper Lucifer (below), to whom God has gifted the power to travel through time





El Shaddai's colour scheme and visuals are at times more than a touch hallucinatory. The architecture and enemy designs draw on a range of ancient influences

The Japanese game industry has always had a healthy approach to blasphemy. Where western developers are content for players to tear their way through an exclusively heathen pantheon, JRPGs have been killing God since the '90s, and when EA was sending Dante down to Hell to hand out some divine retribution, Bayonetta was bending angels over a guillotine. While *El Shaddai: Ascension Of The Metatron* starts off with players working alongside God rather than sticking it to the almighty, the entire experience has been based on a segment of scripture excluded from the Judeo-Christian canon.

El Shaddai is the first game to be directed by **Sawaki Takeyasu**, one of the founders of, and art director at, Capcom's shortlived creative powerhouse Clover Studios. While at Capcom, Takeyasu supplied art and character designs for the original *Devil May Cry,* and later *Okami*, and describes *El Shaddai* as a mixture of the latter game's aesthetic principles and former game's design.

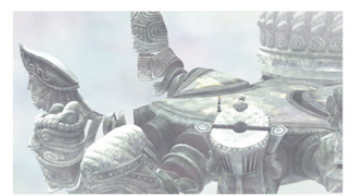
In truth, *El Shaddai* is one of the few games in existence for which a comparison to *Okami* could be seen as a disservice to its visual style. Both games employ cel-shading to striking effect, but whereas *Okami*'s aesthetic was one of wash-painted pictures soaking into parchment, there's a thread of near-surrealism, as well as more variety, underpinning *El Shaddai*'s vibrant swathes of colour. We ask Takeyasu how his background in art and character design has influenced his style of project direction, and he says he feels it makes him a less intimating figure to the artists who pitch their ideas to him, before adding with a grin: "And now I don't have to submit my ideas to anybody but me."

Takeyasu demonstrates an early level in which protagonist Enoch descends from the heavens on a colossal stone hand, before stepping off into a pristine void. From this extreme, Takeyasu drops Enoch into a pitch-black emptiness which begins to burn with photo-negative colours. Slowly, we begin to make out what Takeyasu explains will eventually be the midst of a howling storm. A tree stands in front of Enoch, its foliage either blowing in the wind or burning with a purple/green flame, while similarly hued streams flow past Enoch's feet.

As Enoch steps out of the storm he walks into near-total darkness. The effect is reminiscent of the void levels in *Super Mario Sunshine*, though in place of solid, primary-coloured blocks there are platforms marked out by thin, shimmering lines of colour. A door with a complete set of stairs is drawn into existence in front of Enoch, who walks through it and into the next stage of our demonstration.

While it's hard to think of a stronger confluence between aesthetic and game design than *Okami*'s art style and paintbrush

> Enoch somersaults over his opponent, snatching away his sword before, with swipe of his hand, transforming the weapon from a dark, cruel-looking thing to a pristine blade



This stone platform is the arm of the archangel Michael, whose seven fingers each represent one of the fallen archangels Enoch has been requested by God to bind





While there was nothing to rival *Super Mario Galaxy 2* in the platforming we saw, Takeyasu suggests that the 2D sections will present players with a moderate challenge





It's a cliché, but you simply have to see *El Shaddai* in motion to appreciate its effects. These clouds bubble across the screen like waves on a boiling ocean



Bible basher

***El Shaddai* is a videogame interpretation of the apocryphal Book of Enoch, a piece of scripture not included in the Old Testament canon for claiming a human, Enoch, ascended to become the angel known as Metatron. The book (and the game) chronicles the fall of the Watchers, a group of angels tasked with overseeing humanity who grew too passionate about their subjects and elected to live among them as kings. Enoch's job is to 'forgive' them *Dante's Inferno* style – at the end of a blade. Enoch will be aided in his task by a rather stylishly dressed pre-fall Lucifer, and a host of other archangels who've been reinterpreted to varying degrees: one appears as a semi-naked beauty whose relationship with Enoch will be, we're assured, strictly maternal.**

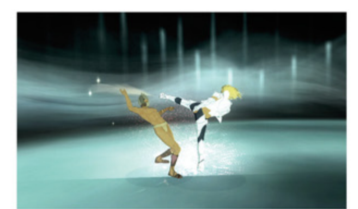
mechanic, *El Shaddai* attempts to convey information through its visuals rather than a HUD. There's no health bar, with vitality instead represented by the armour worn by both Enoch and his foes. Takeyasu demonstrates this by dropping Enoch into combat with a humanoid, sword-wielding foe and taking a beating until his bare-chested body lies slumped on the floor.

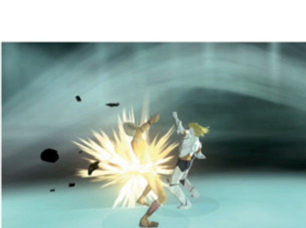
Time to turn the tables. In contrast to games like *Bayonetta* (produced by Takeyasu's ex-Clover colleagues at Platinum Games) which rewards possession of both an intimate understanding of the character's moveset and having the dexterity to match, *El Shaddai*'s combat system prioritises initial simplicity, providing strategic depth through a rock-paper-scissors dynamic between the game's weapons. Of course, in order to use these weapons, Enoch must get his hands on them first. Rather than switching between an extensive inventory, he can carry only a single weapon at time, and these must be wrenched from the hands of unwilling enemies. Enoch begins fighting back, landing blows and shattering armour until the enemy is knocked backwards and temporarily stunned. In this brief window of opportunity, Enoch somersaults over his opponent, snatching away his sword before landing and, with swipe of his hand, transforming the weapon from a dark, cruel-looking thing to a pristine blade. As Enoch proceeds to turn the sword on its previous owner, the music shifts in tempo to reflect the irreversible shift in the balance of power on display.

Other weapons include a pair of gauntlets, which seem to encourage more defensive play, as well as a set of floating projectiles which can be used to keep enemies at bay. Takeyasu explains that the full game will require Enoch to constantly steal fresh weapons in order to ensure he's best equipped for any given scenario, with different enemies more susceptible to different tools.

El Shaddai won't be exclusively combat-focused either, with Takeyasu promising a 'varied' experience. He's coy as to the full range of mechanics on offer, but shows us levels taking place from a side-on perspective with Enoch platforming over clouds and fighting a handful of basic enemies. Bring a projectile weapon to these sections, he explains, and they'll play like a side-scrolling shooter.

Ignition's sales pitch for the game is that *El Shaddai* is the result of a creative mind released from corporate shackles, free to do as he pleases. It's too early to predict whether the full game will adequately support the game's high-concept aesthetic and ideas, but one thing's for certain: Enoch's journey through the scriptures is looking absolutely divine.





The early stages of any battle are the most dangerous. Even though Enoch can remove an enemy's armour with just a few blows, they can strip that pretty white plating from him just as swiftly

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **VISCERAL GAMES**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **2011**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E211**

Dead Space 2

Back to black for Isaac Clarke in EA's thoroughly visceral sequel





Clarke's movement animation has also undergone a polish, as has the control scheme, which means the game doesn't force tension with restrictive manoeuvres



Videogame horror is often scripted by nature, building creeping dread with careful audiovisual cues before unleashing set-piece scares. It doesn't usually leave room for player ingenuity. Taking its predecessor's talent for atmosphere and grisly violence to an extreme, *Dead Space 2* pushes the player towards a more creative approach, plunging protagonist Isaac Clarke into desperate situations where gruesome resourcefulness is the only option. His beefed-up telekinetic abilities can now be used to smash up the scenery and create weapons to fling at pursuers, impale hideous necromorphs on their own severed, bladed limbs, or shoot out a space station window to create a vacuum in a suicidal last stand. It abandons the original *Dead Space*'s largely static environments, matching its visual fidelity and effective light and shadow with all-new physics and interactivity.

Beefed-up telekinesis can be used to smash up scenery, impale necromorphs on their own bladed limbs, or shoot out a space station window

Dead Space 2 is set three years after the original on a dense and vast space city, appropriately named the Sprawl, and plagued by necromorph infection. It's also populated, meaning that the story involves many more non-player characters. The setting allows for both clinical, sparse, well-lit space station buildings and derelict horror, as well as more organic locales – we're shown Clarke in a dark underground mining facility, where the rasped squealing of mutated monsters echoes off rocks that drip and glisten with slime. Outside the space station windows, Saturn glows orange in the near distance. Deep inside, dark corridors and sparse illumination build a sense of danger.

New necromorphs inhabit the Sprawl – pointy-limbed, dog-like Stalkers that flank Clarke in groups of two or three; explosive Crawlers that can be beheaded and thrown at other enemies; small, fast-moving mutants called the Pack that look like nightmarish mannequin children. A blast of stasis still stops them in their tracks, priming them for dismemberment, impalement or worse. Telekinesis is much quicker to use than it once was, and more flexible. Bullets destroy cabinets, lamps and windows, creating shards of glass or metal to use as impromptu weapons. Mutants can be skewered with a javelin gun, and a Visceral Games representative shows us how enemies pinned to walls can be electrocuted, ignited and sliced up into gory projectiles.

Dead Space's foreboding atmosphere owes much to its excellent dynamic lighting and eerie shadows. Lights can be knocked over by necromorphs or left dangling from their fixtures with a careless bullet, leaving Clarke listening for the screeches and scuttling of enemies in the darkness. Windows, too, can be broken – a stray shot can cause a vacuum. Done right, a broken window can suck a room full of necromorphs out into the void and leave Clarke panting on the floor in front of the airlock doors; done wrong, he can get bisected by them. We're shown a tense example in which

The Sprawl's corridors are dotted with hideous mutated cysts that spit explosive seeds and emit a squelching whine. Larger enemies can be lured towards them, or their seeds can be caught and batted back







Pristine buildings, with their furniture intact, are designed to be destroyed, but sparse ammo discourages destruction sprees. Necromorphs, meanwhile, often fight each other, which can be Clarke's salvation in the dark. Luring them towards each other, or towards cysts, conserves ammo and encourages careful exploration. The violence is demonstrated with glee: impaled necromorphs wriggle as their limbs are sliced off



Clarke, having shot a window out at the far end of a corridor, has five seconds to shoot a switch and clamp the shutters down before meeting a grisly end.

In 15 seconds, the scene changes from a white corridor filled with aggressive mutants to blaring sirens and flashing warning lights as Clarke aims one-handed at the switch, trying to hold on to fast-disappearing pieces of scenery as they fly out into space, then back to calm as the closing airlock halts the pull of the vacuum. Most of the glass in the game will be reinforced, of course, and situations where it's not will almost certainly be obvious set-pieces, but *Dead Space 2* clearly wants to push players towards spontaneous use of the environment, forcing them into resourcefulness and risk-taking thanks to a general sparseness of ammo.

Clarke himself, a rather anonymous presence in the first game, now has a face and a voice beneath the futuristic helmet. His talents as an engineer will be put to more interesting uses, and not only in area-specific puzzles; amongst other things, he can hack his way through doors by opening the circuit panel and yanking out the correct handful of wires in a shower of sparks. Failure is punished by a sharp electric shock and a health penalty. Aside from the new javelin gun, we're not shown much of his more conventional weaponry – the focus of our presentation is very much on the more creative violence he can unleash with telekinesis – but he can still use workbenches to tweak different weapons and suits.

Dead Space 2 is uncompromisingly gory. We didn't see Clarke hack off his own arm like *Dead Space: Extraction*'s protagonist, but we did see him cut in half by a closing airlock as he tried to grope his way back into the station. Dismembered enemies drag themselves across the floor, trailing blood; impaled corpses remain pinned to pillars. Though destructible environments and improved telekinesis will significantly change the rhythm and breadth of *Dead Space*'s violence, there hasn't been the significant shift towards action and away from horror that its devotees had feared.



Strategic Dismemberment 2.0

Visceral Games went into a frankly quite disturbing level of detail about its new combat system, catchily entitled Strategic Dismemberment 2.0. As if ripping apart mutants with the plasma cutter in the first *Dead Space* wasn't violent enough for us, they can now be dismembered even more precisely with improved physics. For the first time, the gleeful violence can be applied to other players as well as mutants – Visceral has confirmed multiplayer for *Dead Space 2*, but refused to say anything beyond the fact that it exists, and that we will be able to strategically amputate our friends' limbs. That simple fact alone will be enough for many to chew on.

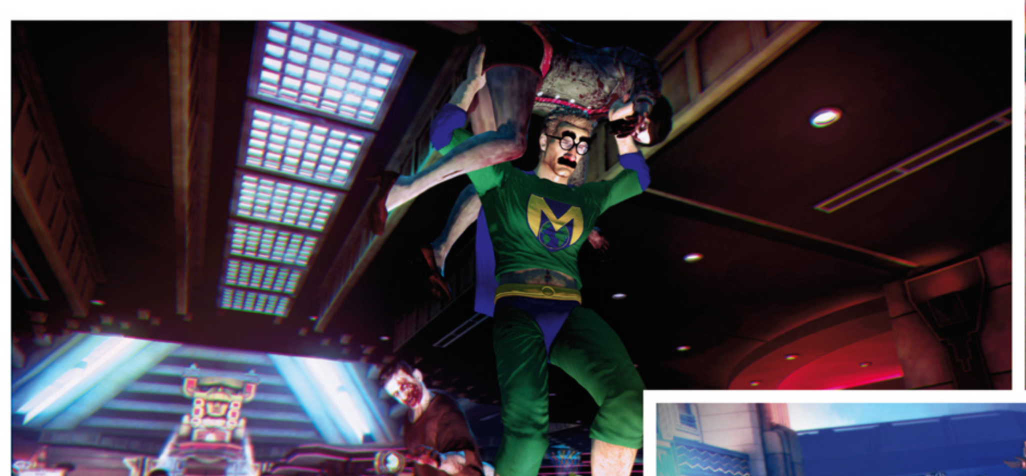


Dead Space **is apparently EA CEO John Riccitiello's favourite game. Presumably he's as delighted with the overhauled dismemberment engine as Visceral is**

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **BLUE CASTLE GAMES**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E208, E209**

Dead Rising 2

An endless horde of zombies, and only a wheelchair with machine-guns attached to stop them. Viva Fortune City





The original *Dead Rising* was nothing if not a giant, grisly playground. Its premise might have been ripped wholesale from Dawn Of The Dead but really, some ideas beg to be stolen. The sheer variety of its gruesome, slapstick weapon set, the realisation of its all-American setting and a save system which, while divisive, engendered a genuine sense of continual survival combined to forge a title which, while far from being the best game ever to feature zombies, was easily the most playful digital recreation of an undead outbreak.

Those who hoped *Dead Rising*'s sequel might find its inspiration in those glimpses of a small town overrun in the first game's introductory helicopter ride will find *Dead Rising 2*'s setting – Las Vegas pastiche Fortune City – a slight disappointment. Our demo opens in the safe, relatively undead-free backrooms of the Royal Flush Plaza, an indoor shopping centre which in both layout and aesthetic could easily be an annexe of the first *Dead Rising*'s Willamette Mall. Before we step out on to the strip proper, however, hero Chuck Greene (who's still yet to convince he's an appropriate substitute for the first game's likeable oaf Frank West) ducks into a storage cupboard in order to introduce one of *Dead Rising 2*'s new mechanics. Where West was limited to attacking the undead horde with whatever weapons he could scavenge from the shelves of Willamette's stores, Greene can take those bits and pieces to utility benches and combine them to form more exotic tools.

Our first DIY cudgel is a straightforward affair – a baseball bat studded with nails – but it certainly gets the job done. *Dead Rising 2* seems, if anything, even more exuberantly violent than its predecessor – pieces fall off zombies depending on where they've been hit – and the makeshift weapons come with a few special animations of their own (Greene impales a zombie's head with his bat before wrenching it clean off). While PP – the means by which West upgraded his moves and abilities – have returned, the previous game's method of collecting them – photography – has not. Instead, PP bonuses are awarded for using Greene's cruel and unusual makeshift weapons in the field. Breaking out the 'exsanguinator' – a vacuum cleaner fitted with saw blades – nets a 400PP bonus for every zombie shredded, for example.

While directly tying experience rewards to combat makes for a more streamlined experience, it's hard not to miss the amusing and voyeuristic photo mechanic from the original game. Framing the perfect snapshot balanced risk and reward more effectively

While boxing gloves with knives attached are a good example of *DR2's* appetite for mixing the comic and grisly, special mention must go to the drill bucket – placed over a zombie's head before reducing it to mush



Like the original *Dead Rising*, zombies become more aggressive at night. As in any crowded mall, it's easy to be caught off-guard as the shuffling, almost disinterested crowd becomes a pack of red-eyed, lunging monsters







Skateboards are an effective means of getting around quickly, but more fun is scooping a zombie up in wheelchair and sending him flying from the seat upon hitting a kerb for a 50PP bonus



While our demo was singleplayer only, *Dead Rising 2*'s weapon-set begs to be explored with a friend. When you'll find the time to relax and share a beer is uncertain, however. For players too lazy to set about crafting their own weaponry we found a custom weapon shop run by an industrious survivor in the upper level of Fortune City's mini-mall

than charging into a crowd of zombies with a pair of chainsaws strapped to a kayak paddle ever could, and when you're watching a toy helicopter with machetes for rotor blades lop the heads off zombies for 300PP a go, it would be nice to be able to take a picture via which to remember the experience. Of course, if the full game is less generous with the number of weapon parts helpfully surrounding utility benches than our demo, and hands out combo cards (instructions for making weapons) at a more considered pace, then tracking down the parts of and eventually crafting Greene's outlandish arsenal could be more engaging.

The second part of our demo takes place in the rather more obviously Vegas-influenced Yacutan Casino, a glitzy mix of slot machines and decomposing showgirls which marks a slightly bolder move away from the original game's aesthetic. It's here that we meet our first pair of psychopaths – the insane humans who function as both an essential genre tradition and the series' bosses. This encounter, between Greene and a pair of katana-wielding, scantily clad twins, is over fairly quickly, in no small part due to a cache of machine-guns nearby. Still, the cutscenes bookending the encounter mark a welcome return for the first game's brand of insanely over-the-top melodrama, managing to cram fetishistic shots of the villainesses' high heels, gratuitous scenes of hostage molestation and, finally, a ritual suicide into a brief duration.

> While directly tying experience rewards to combat makes for a more streamlined experience, it's hard not to miss the amusing and voyeuristic photo mechanic from the original

Dead Rising 2 is a sequel built on a simple formula: bigger is better. More zombies, more locations, more weapons and more ludicrous violence all combine in an attempt to outdo the shock and novelty of the original game. It's an approach that appears mostly successful, but one that will require acknowledgement of the first game's less showy, more central ideas. The strictures of its save system and mission structure underscored its comic violence with a genuine need to prioritise and survive. While it's as yet uncertain whether Fortune City – with its increased scope and new focus on creatively tearing chunks out of the horde – can sustain that tension across an extended visit, it's certainly looking like the right place to go for a chopping trip.







Along with combo cards providing instructions on building new zombie-tenderising tools, the first game's books and magazines (which filled up an inventory slot but awarded bonuses as long as they were held) return

Dead stylish

The large variety of outfits and costumes found on the clothes racks of the first game's mall made for a welcome, if entirely tangential, diversion – and *Dead Rising 2*'s Las Vegas-in-all-but-name setting also allows for amusing additions to Greene's wardrobe. If his bright yellow duds leave you feeling a touch out of place among the slot machines, then why not change into a croupier's outfit (complete with visor and largely ineffective chip-pushing stick) before strolling in to meet the local psychos? Nothing undercuts the portentous utterances of a posturing killer like staring back at them wearing an Elvis-style jumpsuit, either. Be warned, though: like Frank West, Greene insists on posing in his new outfit even as the undead are shuffling towards him.

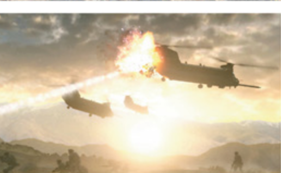
FORMAT: **360, PS3, PC**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **EA LA/DICE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **OCTOBER**

Medal Of Honor

EA's series reboot treads dangerous ground in more ways than one







Cutscenes frequently bookend bursts of activity. In one, a soldier pokes a fallen opposition soldier with his foot, sending the body tumbling down a hillside

Medal Of Honor faces a more interesting challenge than other firstperson shooters of this generation: the war that it depicts is still happening. Moving the series out of the comfortable, well-worn territory of World War II is bold enough for a series reboot, but dropping the player into modern-day Afghanistan shows real bravery. It gives EA Los Angeles the chance to tell a war story that's not only authentic, but relevant – and could also put the developer in the awkward position of skirting dangerous political ground, unless it handles the story and its characters with the most expert touch.

One way to extricate the game from this political minefield is to claim that it's not about the war, but about the soldiers. Pointing to the *Medal Of Honor* series' core tenets of authenticity, respect and, well, honour, senior creative director Rich Farrelly emphasises the role that military consultants and the advice of real operatives have played in the creation of the game's authentic fiction. The developer's respect for the material is evident in the game's attention to detail, from the whispered squad chatter between special operatives to the soldiers' hand placement on their weapons.

The campaign has a two-part narrative structure, intertwining the stories of big-military Rangers and uniformless, specialist Tier 1 ground operatives. The emphasis is on the latter – roughly two thirds of the game follows the specialist forces as opposed to the conventional army – but EA's recent demonstration focused on a four-man Ranger unit attempting to create a safe landing zone for other troops by taking out a dug-in Taliban machine-gun emplacement.



There's nothing to suggest the subject matter is being treated with anything other than respect, but EA is unlikely to dodge controversy as the game nears release

Afghanistan is a geographically varied region, allowing for battles up snow-capped mountains and in surprisingly verdant flatlands, but this mission takes place in a dusty village on arid hillsides that are often associated with the territory. It opens as a helicopter carrying the unit approaches its landing zone; we hear the inner monologue of a soldier compiling a reassuring letter home. It adds a touch of humanity to the characters without being overblown or distasteful, a humanity that's also reflected in the constant, non-repetitive squad chatter and commands. *Medal Of Honor* manages to make its soldiers sound like people without compromising on the authenticity of their military language.

The squad moves quickly through the village, kicking down doors and clearing out the ramshackle houses. The gunplay rhythm is a familiar mix of firing accurate bursts at enemies before ducking back into cover – there's a measure of destructibility, but it seems that the game's walls and buildings will, by and large, stand firm – but the other squad members play as active a role in the mission as you do. They point out and take down enemies on their own as the unit makes its way to the top of the village, shouting constant directions and clarification. Often you're playing a crucial but backseat role in the squad, providing covering fire by keeping your sights trained on the mounted machine-gun while the soldiers move forward to plant a red smoke flare, targeting it for an air strike.

As the jets roar overhead and the emplacement disappears in an all-enveloping cloud of smoke and dust, there's a real feeling of being in a large-scale war. This is further augmented by the dual story threads, the experience of taking part in two different facets of a huge military operation. In terms

In the interests of authenticity, Taliban troops won't often be fighting with tanks or vastly superior technology. Their advantage lies in knowing the terrain

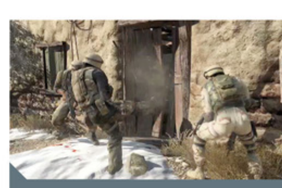




When it isn't obscured by clouds of sand, there is a great deal of detail in the surroundings. Dazzling sunrises can throw clouds and misty mountainsides into bright relief



The soldiers remain unnamed, but both threads of the campaign's story follow a squad of four, developing their personalities



Alternative perspectives

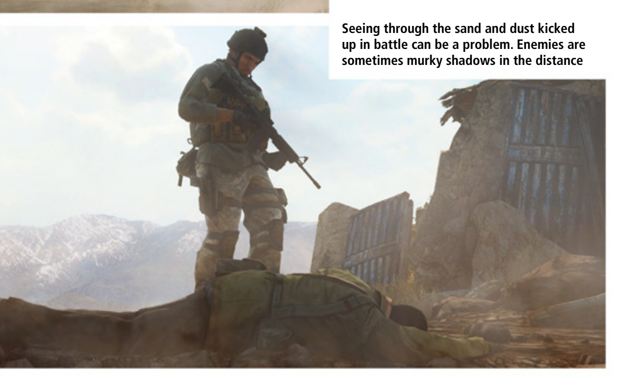
***Medal Of Honor*'s multiplayer is being developed separately at DICE, using the Frostbite engine in place of the singleplayer's modified Unreal Engine 3. EA refuses to be drawn on details, but is keen to stress that it won't be a simple facsimile of *Bad Company 2*'s fine online multiplayer. This throws up interesting questions – not just about the potential for fully destructible multiplayer battlefields, but about the possibility of playing as the opposing forces (in this case, the Taliban). Humanising US soldiers fighting in Afghanistan is a fine enough line to walk without giving players the chance to play as 'the other side' in a current conflict.**

of authenticity, copious research has gone into the environments, the clothes worn by the enemies you face, and the languages they speak. Thanks to all the dust, though, picking out finer details can be tricky. Kicked up in plumes by suppressing fire, it lingers in the air, obscuring vision. "Check your weapons – this stuff is like glue," shouts the squad leader, disappearing through the heat haze and down the other side of the hilltop.

After your men have chased two remaining Taliban militia through a valley, the road opens up into a sudden mountain vista. At the foot of the slope in the middle distance there's a suspiciously deserted group of huts; the increasingly nervous unit moves in to clear them. As they prepare to breach the first door, there's the telltale ring of a mobile phone; the mission ends as a bomb knocks out the entire squad.

Switching between two different groups of soldiers with very different approaches could make *Medal Of Honor* a high-tension experience. Missions as the Tier 1 operatives – the scalpel to the Rangers' sledgehammer, as EA Los Angeles is very fond of analogising – are more precise, requiring the player to keep control of the chaos and avoid gunfights wherever possible. Air strikes and full-on assaults are matters for the heftier military forces. The variety adds perspective, which is usually absent from the eight-hour rollercoaster rides that form most singleplayer campaigns. There's nothing to suggest that the subject matter is being treated with anything other than the respect it deserves, but EA is unlikely to dodge controversy as the game nears release. Hopefully its apparent quality won't be obscured by knee-jerk media outrage.

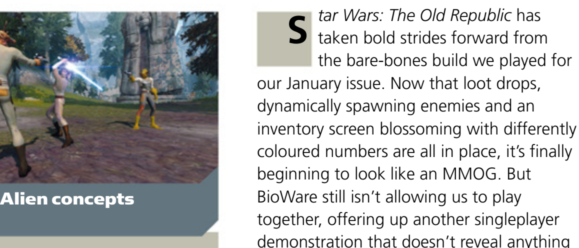
Seeing through the sand and dust kicked up in battle can be a problem. Enemies are sometimes murky shadows in the distance



FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **BIOWARE**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **SPRING 2011**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E196, E204, E210**

Star Wars: The Old Republic

BioWare claims it's going to be the biggest game in the world. But is it an MMOG yet?



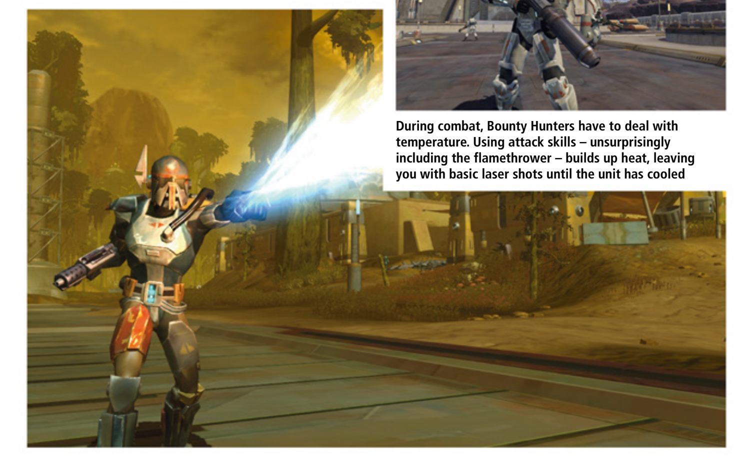
Alien concepts

Our first look at the Bounty Hunter was also our first look at playable alien races, which until now had been nothing but a vague promise. The Rikkitaki are pale-faced humanoids – evidently all of the playable races in the game will be humanoid, presumably so that BioWare doesn't have to design yet more special equipment to fit jelloid blobs, or design another language to fill a few hundred more pages of the game's story bible. Narrative will remain the same across species and specialisations – there are also two branching specialisations for each class, available at a certain level and broadening the possibilities for character personalisation further.

Star Wars: The Old Republic has taken bold strides forward from the bare-bones build we played for our January issue. Now that loot drops, dynamically spawning enemies and an inventory screen blossoming with differently coloured numbers are all in place, it's finally beginning to look like an MMOG. But BioWare still isn't allowing us to play together, offering up another singleplayer demonstration that doesn't reveal anything about how *SWTOR*'s storytelling and fluid combat are going to function in groups.

We get the chance to play as possibly *The Old Republic*'s most coveted class, the Boba Fett-inspired Bounty Hunter. It's strange to play a Star Wars game unaccompanied by the swish and hum of a Lightsaber, but the new class has gadgets and firepower with their own allure. Missiles, rapid-fire and flamethrower attacks decorate the skill bar at the bottom of the screen.

We're given a low-level quest in the Bounty Hunter's story arc. A repulsive Hutt called Nem'ro orders us to retrieve the head of the leader of a rebellious Evocii village nearby, after killing four of his entourage to get him to acknowledge our presence. After dispatching his minions – who, like all of *SWTOR*'s enemies at this stage, present absolutely no challenge – we're offered the head of another dead warrior to present to Nem'ro instead, or the option to murder the leader and everyone else in the encampment. The dialogue is still the most polished aspect of *SWTOR*, the Bounty Hunter quipping with characteristic sarcasm. Picking a churlish response out of curiosity or boredom might lead to an awkward situation that could snap at your heels a hundred hours later.



During combat, Bounty Hunters have to deal with temperature. Using attack skills – unsurprisingly including the flamethrower – builds up heat, leaving you with basic laser shots until the unit has cooled

SWTOR is looking more visually distinctive with every showing. Its stylised, vivid vibe is reminiscent of Genndy Tartakovsky's Clone Wars animated series, and its environments and characters are beginning to bloom with colour. It could hardly be more different from *Star Wars: Galaxies*' staid adherence to the original trilogy's look and feel.

But where are the non-combat elements? We've got loot now, and the classes and skill trees are filling out (see 'Alien concepts'), but where's the crafting, the trading, the social areas, the clan infrastructure? BioWare's categorical refusal to show anything at all until it's certain to appear in the finished game might protect the developer from making false promises, but it also doesn't help to convince potential players that *SWTOR* will have any of the social features that distinguish MMOGs from enormous singleplayer games. As proud as BioWare is of the amount of content in *SWTOR* – thousands of pages of dialogue, full voicing, more individually designed equipment and clothing for one class than other games have in their entirety – successful MMOGs aren't just content dumps. However much content BioWare crams in, it's the community that will keep players there to experience it all.

But *SWTOR* is clearly different from other MMOGs. It's committed to delivering the same strong, personalised narrative to the same high standard as BioWare's singleplayer RPGs, and that immediately alters its balance, weighting it more towards content than community. If it keeps progressing at this rapid pace, however, there's a chance that the game we see at launch next year will be unrecognisable.



You receive calls from story NPCs via an extremely nifty-looking handheld hologram device. If only it could be used to communicate with other characters as well. We can dream



FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **ATARI**
DEVELOPER: **EDEN STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **FRANCE**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN**

Test Drive Unlimited 2

After the experiment of Alone In The Dark, Eden Studios returns to the open-world racetrack



Co-operative play allows for passengers to ride shotgun and input navigation to desired locations. The roads and architecture of Ibiza have been modelled on hard data, with over 2,000 miles of tarmac and alleyways to look good on

Classic, asphalt and off-road challenges should add spice to your racing life, though how far into the rugged world of rally Eden will venture remains to be revealed

It's something of a stretch to call *Test Drive Unlimited 2* a racing game. An expansion of the free-roaming tendencies of its predecessor, it takes its inspiration from the popularity of social networking and MMOGs as much as the latest showroom dream cars.

It's a hard life, but not in this inch-perfect recreation of Ibiza. Initially, your toughest decision will be which of the accurately modelled beaches to head for, complete with day/night cycles, or which decal you want pasting over your Ferrari's bonnet.

Driving clubs (the equivalent of guilds) are a major hinge and offer the greatest incentive to venture online with a new 'game editor' designed to catalyse competition. Setting the start, end and time limit on any stretch of road is a play on track-editing that removes the need for time-consuming uploads and inspires exploration. You can also set the cash reward for challenges and pool resources into your club's showroom fund – though leaving a club revokes access to your prized communal motors. The shared spaces where the new out-of-car perspective kicks in range from showrooms to your private abode, allowing you to socialise with the usual mod-con chat options and inspect your vehicles for authentic glossy sheen, though they're removed from the open world at large.

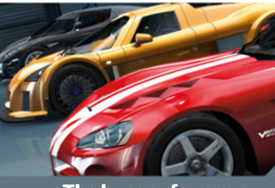
Progression is tiered to encourage singleplayer exploration, and the car wrecks littered throughout the island – which, once discovered, build up to make limited-edition vehicles – make a trip off the beaten track more alluring than ever and are one of the few hints that you could use to label *TDU2* a game instead of a luxury lifestyle simulation. The segmented structure (split across Competition, Discovery, Social and Collection) is a bid to entwine on- and offline play, each piece of the pie adding evenly to your career status and bragging rights as well as eventually accumulating better cars and more elaborate homesteads (from apartments to jacuzzi-equipped yachts), and allowing you to match-make with users cut from a similar cloth.

Though authenticity is the order of this bright and sunny day, compromises have been made to keep your motors running. Localised damage is limited and doesn't affect performance in a bid to prevent players becoming disgruntled by more aggressive rivals. The danger is that – when partnered with the more user-friendly car handling – entry-level racing challenges may feel more like a spin on the dodgems than seatbelt-snapping street races. Take the wheel of a high-end Ferrari or Audi, however, and the sensation of speed is undeniable. Eden hasn't just captured the look and feel of Ibiza, all signs suggest it has captured the sensation of a down-shifting overtake at 100mph – and it's irresistible.

As good as the levels of detail and range of customisations are, *TDU2* currently comes across as an empty Ibiza dancefloor. But then that's to be expected. When it's populated by hungry fanatics, each applying their own challenge ingredients and splashes of personality, all the pieces will be in place for Eden's latest to evolve into a banquet of beautiful cars and all-inclusive seaside excursions.



If you exhaust Ibiza, there's always the option to head to the airport and hop on a plane to the Hawaiian island of Oahu, familiar to players of the original



The hunger for more

At a glance you might mistake some elements of *TDU2* for Sony's PlayStation Home, such is the level of customisation and potential for self-improvement or embarrassment. Changing the décor of your new pad, right down to the upholstery and the wooden floorboards, is as addictive and intricate as traditional car tuning. The in-car view is surely one of the most detailed yet realised in a racing game, right down to the stitching in the seats. The electric windows even open at the press of a button. Perfect for catching the virtual summer breeze.







Kane & Lynch 2: Dog Days

Five hours with IO's reworked Fragile Alliance reveal a unique multiplayer philosophy

FORMAT: **360, PS3,**
PUBLISHER: **SQUARE ENIX**
DEVELOPER: **IO INTERACTIVE**
ORIGIN: **DENMARK**
RELEASE: **AUGUST 27**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E211, E214**

Kane & Lynch: Dead Men had the beginnings of a great idea in its Fragile Alliance multiplayer mode, wherein up to eight people competed for the lion's share of the cash from a heist. It encouraged players to work together while simultaneously giving them the chance to stab each other in the back – a dynamic that proved strangely addictive, and which lies at the heart of the vastly expanded version of Fragile Alliance in *Kane & Lynch 2*. The new game modes are various takes on a cops-and-robbers theme, pitting four criminals against four enforcers attempting to stop the heist. It skirts the border between co-operative and competitive, changing the balance of power with every round.

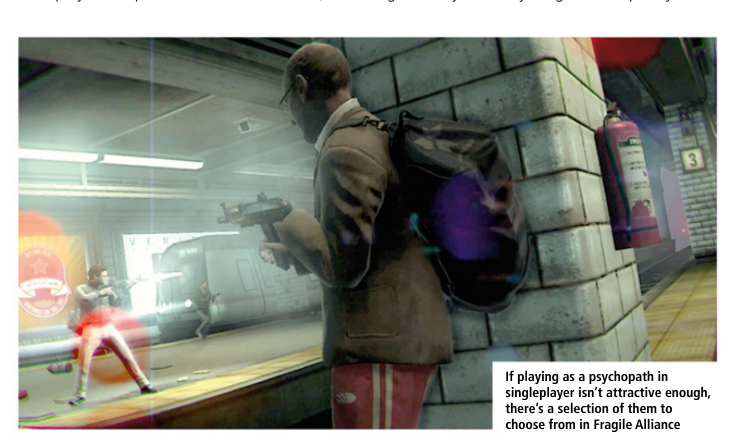
The focus is on small, tangible tasks rather than the massive battlefields of its multiplayer competitors – teams are small, maps are tightly packed and games are quick and high on adrenaline. In the main Fragile Alliance mode, criminals start at one end of the map and enforcers at the other; after making their way to the jewels, cash or coke at the centre of the level, criminals have to collect all they can before making a break for an escape vehicle. Once the goods are in hand, criminals can turn on each other and steal their teammates' share of the goods, or pay the getaway vehicle to depart early, leaving other criminals turning the final corner just as you squeal off into the distance.

Work together, and the criminals share the cash; the fewer of you remain, the greater the rewards. But soften the squad with too much infighting before the enforcers have made their rush, and nobody gets away with anything. As we quickly discover, it's essential to work together rather than simply opening fire as soon as the opportunity presents itself. Wiping out teammates isn't easy – instant kills aren't possible – and attacking a comrade brands you as a traitor, prompting the others to turn on you. Undercover Cop mode gives you even more cause to doubt others by planting an undercover enforcer in the criminals' team. Suddenly, the merest hesitation in the rush for loot becomes cause for suspicion.

Crucially, the tension is high on both sides. It's as exciting to chase an escaping criminal up a fire escape as he makes a break for the departing helicopter with a million dollars stuffed into his duffle bag as it is to be him. The cameraphone-esque shaky-cam augments the speed, tension and cop-show feel of the action. There's still some tweaking to do: the rewards for pulling off a bust against the odds as an undercover cop are a little light, and it's currently possible for enforcers to camp next to the getaway vehicle and simply destroy it before anyone has the chance to make an escape. But the core ideas at the heart of Fragile Alliance are excellently implemented, and it might be *Dog Days*' most alluring feature. It's certainly among its most innovative.



Criminals who are killed by enforcers (or by their turncoat teammates) can respawn as cops, giving them the opportunity to take revenge and keeping all players involved as the heist comes to its conclusion



If playing as a psychopath in singleplayer isn't attractive enough, there's a selection of them to choose from in Fragile Alliance



Change of pace

***Kane & Lynch*'s other multiplayer mode, Cops and Robbers, echoes the structure of Fragile Alliance, but not the ethos. You're still put together as a team of four – four cops, four robbers – but there are no longer any rewards for betraying your teammates, and the feel is more akin to a conventional team deathmatch, with each team sharing rewards for kills as well as stolen loot. It's a little difficult to get out of the suspicious, backstabbing mindset that Fragile Alliance encourages, but Cops and Robbers has a very different strategic rhythm. Cops are given a head start, allowing them to set up ambushes in the concise, well-designed maps.**



Call Of Duty: Black Ops

Treyarch pushes aside the twitching Infinity Ward to take its turn at the billion-dollar FPS

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION**
DEVELOPER: **TREYARCH**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER**

It's hard to work out who's sighing more now *COD*'s turned its back on WWII. The gamers who never have to fire another bolt-action rifle? Or Treyarch's developers, who can stop furiously studying the Normandy beaches to see if there's a stretch that hasn't been used twice before?

The best part of this long-overdue change is that while it's not quite modern warfare, it's modern enough. Familiar weapons like the M16 and Steyr AUG feel contemporary because they still see active service in most games. In *Black Ops*' '60s setting, however, they're fresh military toys. A surveillance mission uses grainy monochrome CRTs and chunky *Fallout 3*-style knobs to feel like cutting-edge espionage tech from James Bond's Sean Connery era.

It turns out that you've only got to move on a few years from WWII to make everything feel fresh, exciting and, with the '60s sheen, somehow classy, too. The shooting is as chaotic, rapid and tangible as it's ever been, enemies dropping with shocking speed from rapid bursts of gunfire and action exploding perfectly on cue. But it's the little things that stand out. Like climbing into a high-speed, high-altitude SR-71 Blackbird reconnaissance plane and noticing the extremely natty orange high-altitude spacesuit worn by your co-pilot, through your own astronaut's visor. The crackly radio chatter as you guide a ground team from the upper atmosphere recalls *COD4*'s AC-130 level but this time recreated with the language, technology and crisp austerity of the Cold War.

It's during the more direct action sequences, though, that you get the sense that Treyarch has really grasped what makes *COD* work. *World At War* relied on shock and gore, plus a gimmicky exploitation of Japanese tactics. The missions we've seen here demonstrate an acute understanding of how to engage the player; how to manipulate expectations to deliver exhilaration, threat and suspense. And, importantly, without relying on cheap tricks.

Three of the missions are based in Vietnam in 1968 and a fourth in the Soviet mountains. The latter involves a snowy infiltration that rivals *Modern Warfare 2*'s Russian-forest-based Contingency level. The pace is initially slow, moving with a team to avoid patrols while using a crossbow to silently neutralise guards, before it erupts into a running gun battle. What begins as an atmospheric stealth level ends with a gorgeous slo-mo abseiling sequence as you smash through a window, and a thumping escape as you parachute from a mountainside to avoid an avalanche.

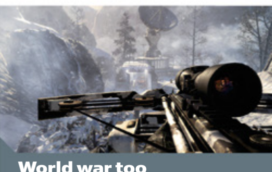
The Vietnam levels offer similar width and texture. Missions see you repelling VC attacks with a shotgun firing incendiary shells, calling in Hueys to attack buildings, or creeping nervously through dark, narrow tunnels. The game engine has been massively overhauled, feeling rich with detail and scale – whether you're creeping through thick, oppressive jungle, fighting through urban streets or blasting convoys, bridges and bases from the air in a stolen Hind.

Again, though, it's the subtle things that leave a mark. Like watching your NPC partner silently lower a guard's body from a window. Or swimming underwater as fizzing bubble trails mark out bullets from pursuing enemies. If Treyarch can maintain this level of quality, then not-so-modern warfare may well be the future.

Usually, you'll be fighting as part of a team, the US special forces group known as SOG. Captain Price won't be on hand, but expect a time-hopping cameo from *World At War*'s Russian sniper, Reznov



The narrow streets of Wei City provide a surprisingly contemporary urban warzone. Throw in a helicopter you can call in to blast designated buildings and you have a thunderous battlefield



World war too

It's easy to see why *Call Of Duty: Vietnam* was so strongly rumoured. Three of the four levels shown so far are set in 'Nam, recalling everything from Platoon, Full Metal Jacket and even The Deer Hunter. But talking with Treyarch reveals that the Cold War setting was picked specifically for the potential breadth it offered – specifically a window that lasts from the end of WWII right up until the mid-'90s. As a result, almost any conflict or military action from the period is ripe for the picking, especially considering studio head Mark Lamia has confirmed a plot arc spanning decades. Who fancies a bit of multiplayer 1980 Iranian Embassy siege?

FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS**
DEVELOPER: **SOUTHEND INTERACTIVE**
ORIGIN: **SWEDEN**
RELEASE: **TBA**

Ilomilo

A Head Over Heels for the download generation?



The only parts of upcoming puzzle game *Ilomilo* that Swedish developer Southend has allowed out of the studio so far are a tutorial and the first world. But this is enough to get a flavour of what's to come. The game boils down to an attempt to reunite two lost friends, Ilo and Milo, in a 3D environment consisting of fuzzy-looking cubes. In order for them to meet, you need to solve the three-dimensional puzzles that are keeping the pair apart, and they must cooperate by manipulating cubes that do different things. Some can be expanded, for example, while others function as trampolines.

These first levels are intended to showcase the game's core mechanics, but the development team certainly appears to have more tricks up its sleeve. "What we're doing in later levels," producer **Fredrik Erlandsson** explains, "is adding functionality to these cubes." He mentions one that enables you to switch sides and another that can move around the levels by itself. You'll also be able to interact with the creatures that inhabit the world, such as the Muncher, an animal used for riding. Erlandsson mentions that this particular character is partial to apple juice, but quite how important this factor proves in practice, we're not sure. But then in the world of *Ilomilo*, you can't necessarily be sure of anything.

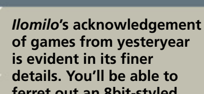
Playing through the levels could be compared to navigating a children's pop-up book come to life, albeit one with a certain oddness creeping on to every single page. If you look beyond the quirky graphics, however, you'll find that the whole thing feels and behaves like an old-school puzzle game. The retro-flavoured charm is at its brightest in the form of the game's chirpy music. These melodies sound just like they did in the '80s, albeit with the introduction of more rounded tones.

The game focuses on cooperation, even when you're playing on your own. You'll need to switch between the two main characters, which adds another layer of complexity to the puzzle-solving process. The twoplayer mode functions in the same way, as participants take turns controlling their characters. While waiting, the inactive player can take charge of other things – a helpful partner can control a fly and use it to point out items the other might have missed, for example. If you want to be more bothersome, however, you can bring up puppet musicians on the screen – we discovered that a poorly tuned tuba works wonders as a distraction. It's not exactly in the spirit of cooperative gaming, of course, but it's an amusingly cheeky feature.

Ilomilo has a kind of infectious madness throughout, and it may be a challenge for Southend to keep the game from becoming too sane, but there's definitely potential in this carpeted conundrum.

The world of *Ilomilo* is a detailed landscape filled with all sorts of fascinating creatures and objects created by the game's only artist, Southend Interactive's art director Simon Flesser, who has been drawing characters like Ilo and Milo since he was about four years old. They're something of a departure from the style of the developer's previous output, which includes *R-Type Dimensions*, *Lode Runner* and *Virtua Fighter Mobile*



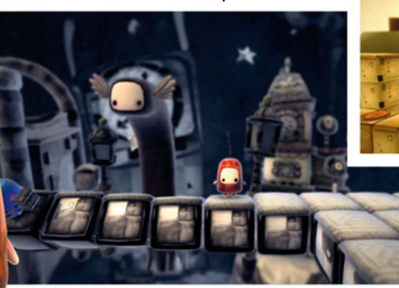


A blast from the puzzling past

***Ilomilo*'s acknowledgement of games from yesteryear is evident in its finer details. You'll be able to ferret out an 8bit-styled minigame entitled *Ilomilo Shuffle* which features fast-paced puzzling and will have its own leaderboard, and Southend also claims that various retro-styled characters will be hidden in the main game. Details are being kept under wraps, but it wouldn't be surprising if the cameos hail from classic puzzlers, albeit perhaps in skewed form.**



Even when Ilo and Milo are this close you might still be a long way from completing the puzzle – they can only cross over to the other side of the cubes at certain points in the level



Some of the creatures seen in *Ilomilo* can help you on your quest to reunite the two title characters in the cube labyrinth. If you happen to come across a Muncher (above), it might be willing to offer you a ride in the right direction, or you could use a plunger cube to press a button in the level



Slage

Co-op demon slicing as France's biggest MMOG maker diversifies

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **ANKAMA**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **FRANCE**
RELEASE: **2011**



Having a total of 12 classes in the game leads to it having a level of tactical variation that's not generally found in typical hack'n'slashers. Ranged fighters can throw up barriers to block nearby enemies, allowing their companions to regroup and launch an attack on their own terms, or to focus more on pure damage dealing rather than defending



Fringed with hoardings and banners emblazoned with characters and games utterly unfamiliar to English speakers, French developer Ankama's fifth showcase at the Porte de Versailles convention centre quickly breeds alienation. Comforting, then, to hear unmistakable words come untranslated from *Slage*'s lead designer: it seems that hack'n'slash is the same in both English and French.

Slage is a translingual burst of *Diablo*-esque multiplayer combat. Four players are thrown into randomly generated dungeons, stuffed to the anime-tinged gunwales with enemies of increasing sizes. For those unversed in Ankama's other output, this is your simple crib sheet. Combat is played for overlaps, with differing character types offering riffs on typical RPG-lite classes, the ranged fighters hanging back while the melee types get stuck in.

It's a simple sell. Clicking on things and having them drop trinkets and die is invariably an enjoyable process. But possess a handful of knowledge about Ankama's other projects and *Slage* slots neatly into a rich and deep mythology. *Dofus* is the main tie, the isometric MMOG that boasts a playerbase of over 30 million. Sharing a similar aesthetic, and existing in a parallel, monster-filled world, *Slage* takes its cues from the French-oriented game. The 12 character classes on offer are straight from the MMOG, and the game's foes – demons feeding on chaos and rage – fit with the existing lore.

But there's a distinct line between *Slage* and the staunchly family-friendly *Dofus*. Ankama's convention stands are uniformly open-plan and inviting – except *Slage*'s booth. Ringed by dark curtains and closed off from the public, the game is shown to be conscientiously bloodier than its MMOG cousins. The promised hacking and slashing manifests itself in neatly animated splashes of claret, cute manga-esque demons cut down with brutal, staccato bursts of weapon-heavy combat. Elsewhere on the convention floor, parents stand over their young children, escorting them as they play Ankama's other youth-oriented fare. Quite how the company's step into the violence of *Slage*'s battles will play with its existing consumers is yet to be seen, but good looks and tactical depth might well entice the rest of us.

Blacklight: Tango Down

Opponents showing through walls, graphical glitches and error screens. All deliberate in Zombie's techno-warfare

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **IGNITION ENTERTAINMENT**
DEVELOPER: **ZOMBIE STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **Q2 2010**

If nothing else, *Blacklight: Tango Down* was an inevitability. *Battlefield 1943* has sold 1.5 million units across PSN and XBLA to date, and Zombie Studios' online FPS, seeking to offer players a suite of features and level of polish rivalling any boxed release, is the first downloadable title hoping to emulate its success.

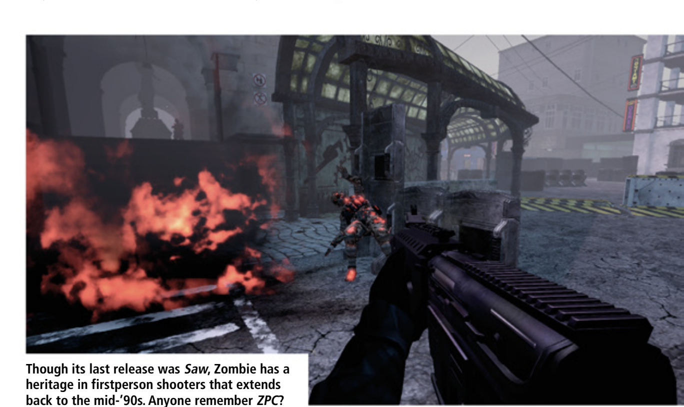
Blacklight's most immediate feature is the distinctive nature of its visuals. Not the level and character design, which do not move far beyond cyperpunk convention, but the way in which such styling has been brought to life. *Blacklight*'s near-future setting sees its soldiers peering through 'hyper reality visors' which lend a heavy dose of self-conscious computerisation to the game's visual style. Take a hit and the screen will morph into a pixellated blur; die and a series of error messages will flash across the screen. This has allowed smoke and stun grenades to be rebranded as vision-distorting digital warfare devices, though their functionality remains unchanged.

More tangibly, these visors can be used to temporarily allow players to spot opponents and objectives through walls. This ability, which requires time to recharge and leaves players temporarily unable to fire, ensures that teams will struggle to stay entrenched in what may otherwise be advantageous positions.

Zombie sees the game's vast range of customisation features – press releases boast of 152 million primary weapon combinations – and ranking system as *Blacklight*'s long-term draw. Which begs a question: what was the real secret of *Battlefield 1943*'s success? By paring down the *Battlefield* experience to three classes and an equal number of maps, DICE offered a package which balanced initial accessibility with long-term appeal. Perhaps the question *Blacklight* asks, then, is whether downloadable products need to offer experiences distinct from their retail counterparts, or merely similar experiences at more affordable prices.



Capturing a control point in objective-based games requires players to play a quick minigame. In the midst of battle, it's an effective tension-raising device



Though its last release was *Saw*, Zombie has a heritage in firstperson shooters that extends back to the mid-'90s. Anyone remember *ZPC*?

Ghost Trick: Phantom Detective

Save the day by possessing a fridge in the newest adventure from Phoenix Wright's creator

FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **JUNE 24 (JAPAN) WINTER 2010 (UK)**

Shu Takumi's *Ace Attorney* series, for all its focus on the cold, hard logic of courtroom drama, became increasingly preoccupied with the supernatural excesses of its plotlines as it continued. It's no surprise, then, that his latest project, *Ghost Trick*, is an adventure game built entirely around the rather eclectic abilities of its freshly slain protagonist.

Whereas *Ace Attorney* cases can only begin once a murder has already taken place, *Ghost Trick* is built around preventing them happening at all. Our demo opens with a scene at a rubbish dump, with the protagonist's body crumpled in a heap upon the floor. The presumed murderer is threatening a bystander, and it's up to the player, via their newly acquired ability to possess inanimate objects, to stop him.

The drama between the murderer and his potential victim can be paused at any time by entering Ghost mode, which allows the player's soul to leapfrog from one object to the next with a drag of the stylus. Some objects can be used to perform Tricks – such as activating a crossing gate to knock the murderer off his aim.

Another ghostly power, activated via possessing a still-warm corpse, is to jump back in time to experience the final four minutes of the deceased's life. In the case of this young woman (we couldn't save her first time around), it allows us to add another layer of Tricks on to those already present in the scene – the crossing gate still swings, but now we're able to use the time that buys us to drop a wrecking ball on the murderer's head as well.

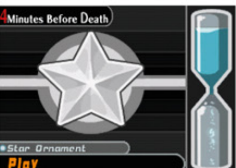
Ghost Trick's stylishly animated drama – and the effect of your actions – provides a sense of dynamism adventure games can often lack. If the full game's puzzles live up to this potential, then *Ghost Trick* might be the title to reanimate a genre which can, on occasion, feel stiff.



Like *Phoenix Wright*, *Ghost Trick* lays on the 'hints' in its 'script' rather thickly. Also as in those games, the writing and localisation are witty and of genuinely high calibre







The ever-trickling sand of the hourglass lends a strong sense of urgency to *Ghost Trick*'s puzzles (right). The game's animated drama (above) is fluid and surprisingly captivating, a fine contrast to the usual static frames seen in DS games. The hairstyles are typically eccentric, though

Okamiden

A smaller, cuter return visit to Capcom's beautiful hand-drawn Japan

FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2010 (JAPAN), 2011 (UK, US)**

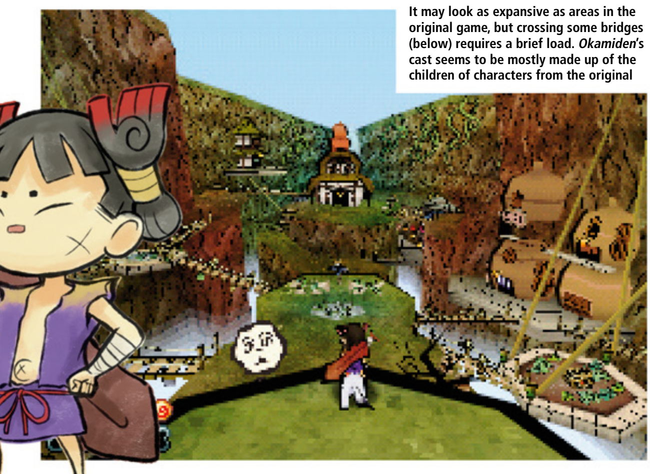
In many ways, despite comparisons to *Twilight Princess* at the time of release, the original *Okami* was never quite the *Zelda* clone it appeared to be. Clover's game was as epic, but its linear, episodic structure, calligraphy-based magic system and emphasis on combat as opposed to puzzle-rich dungeons ensured the two titles stood well enough apart.

It's ironic, then, that *Okamiden* so quickly brings to mind comparisons with last year's *Spirit Tracks*. Not in the control scheme, which keeps movement on the D-pad, saving stylus controls for brush powers, but through the use of a new celestial brush technique which sees its wolf pup protagonist, Chibiterasu, guiding his partner via your stylus between the traps and over the crumbling bridges of the demo's gloomy caves. Familiar powers, such as the ability to bring dead trees back to bloom with a swirl of the brush, or cut enemies in half with a horizontal swipe, have returned alongside the paint-by-numbers puzzles – filling in the missing half of a bridge, for instance – which punctuated the original game. Using the powers – a tap of R pauses the action and shifts the image on to the lower screen – feels as natural as you would expect from the most literal interpretation of *Okami*'s powers yet seen.

Visually, *Okamiden* has survived the transition mostly intact. Those brushstroke outlines seem slightly thicker, and much of our demo is limited to relatively drab interiors or empty voids, but there are glimpses of a village which preserves the character and charm of *Okami*. Character models and cutscenes, meanwhile, show off the series' art style as well as anything seen in the previous game.

The original *Okami* was a breath of fresh air, an epic with a visual style almost impervious to the effects of age. *Okamiden* has clearly preserved the elements which made *Okami* special, and with a few well-executed ideas of its own can easily sustain both a second outing and a transfer to the smaller screen.





It may look as expansive as areas in the original game, but crossing some bridges (below) requires a brief load. *Okamiden*'s cast seems to be mostly made up of the children of characters from the original


POLICE
THE HEAT IS ON



WHAT HAPPENS WHEN AN IRRESISTIBLE DEV MEETS AN INDESTRUCTIBLE FRANCHISE? AT THE VERY LEAST, THE SPARKS WILL FLY

The maths isn't difficult. One of Electronic Arts' biggest brands, plus a new dev studio (Criterion), plus a new direction should equal big success, shouldn't it?

But there's an unknown: just what is *Need For Speed*? The series has had more iterations than Criterion's own *Burnout*, and various studios have over time overhauled its engine and applied new paintjobs. *Need For Speed*'s early days were about the thrill of the chase and the flash of the sirens. Getaway games that encouraged frivolity. *Need For Speed Underground* rode the wave of street racing and modding culture, a slick slice of urban nightlife that found a young audience ripe for the racing. In recent years the changes have been even more varied. *Pro Street*, perhaps, was the most obvious misstep – more a hangover from *Underground*'s success, letting in daylight and more formal rules in place of neon nights and nitrous-fuelled brutality. Then came the more balanced and challenging *Shift*, developed in conjunction with the independent Slightly Mad Studios and sporting a much more refined and mature chassis than any previous models.

TITLE: **NEED FOR SPEED HOT PURSUIT**
FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **CRITERION GAMES**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **TBC**

Through all this it's difficult to identify defining characteristics, but arguably its most successful iterations have two: cat and mouse.

So what is Criterion's take on *Need For Speed*? Creative director **Craig Sullivan** begins with a visual demonstration, plonking two model cars on the table. One is a bright orange Lamborghini and the other an American police car. "It's about the basic loop of this guy runs, this guy chases." So far, so familiar. "In the last three to five years the most requested feature [for *Burnout*] is being able to play as this guy." Sullivan's hand rests on the squad car. "The thinking was, let's give an equal measure to these guys. What would that game loop be?"

Having perfected cross-town chaos with *Burnout Paradise*, how exactly do you organise a car chase? The inspiration for Criterion's *NFS* comes from a nostalgic, purist point of view, as Sullivan makes clear: "Playing *NFS* 14 or 15 years ago on a friend's 3DO in my parents' room, I was driving at 170mph through a beautiful valley thinking that I may never be able to afford one of these cars but I was having this brilliant experience. Ever since then I've bought, played and loved *NFS* games."

"I think *NFS* has changed a lot," says online producer **Matt Webster**. "*Underground* was so of that moment. The series can handle all of these things. This is Criterion doing *NFS*, so what does that mean? To us it means exotics, cops and racers. Let's bring it into a new generation of players and consoles – the connected generation."

In practice, as we negotiate a linear (albeit branching) route, *Hot Pursuit* hits the mark with a tyre iron. Anyone who's burned down *Burnout Paradise*'s freeways or boosted off its many ramps will recognise the goosebumps induced by *Hot Pursuit*'s pulverising pace and face-lifting straights. In many ways, it's to be expected. This is, after all, what Criterion does. It's the king of the high-octane road, knowing full well when and how to shift gears. Tail-lights blurring as you unleash the nitrous? Check. Particle effects fizzing between the asphalt and your Pirellis? Check. Road spikes, helicopters, EMPs? Hold on – what?

Taking the role of a racer, a rolling start drops you into the deep end with your pursuer – AI or human – seconds behind. The advantage normally granted to furious escapees is hindered by the fact that the police car in tow is also a high-end sports



Webster (left) and Sullivan are enthusiastic about the use of licensed cars in *Hot Pursuit*, determined to capture a sense of speed without a complex control scheme. This was evident in our hands-on demo, the handling familiar but with the heft of an millionaire's muscle car



Hot Pursuit may draw on real cars, including the no-messing-about Ford GT, but the 'California-inspired' setting isn't tied to any genuine road maps

car. Bat your eyelids twice and you'll lose ground, along with a strip of your sexy paintwork. A 'Heat' meter provides boost juice and fills in proportion to your speed-limit-breaking felonies, forcing you to swallow down intoxicating velocity that wouldn't be out of place in a *Wipeout* duel. But there's nothing floaty about the handling of these metal behemoths: here, the real world has crept into Criterion's approach more than ever before. Handling is heavier, with more weight loaded to your tail-end (crucial for high-speed handbrake turns and burning doughnuts around Johnny Law), and the chances you'll be launched into the air by a stray piece of plywood are low. "We're not making *Need For Speed Mario Kart*," states Sullivan. "We want to keep it in the realms of possibility."

The option to slam on the brakes and retrace your skidmarks will come as a shock to the *Burnout* faithful, but it's one of the most valuable weapons at your disposal – along with the radar jammer, of course. If *Burnout* was about relentless forward momentum, *Hot Pursuit* is about channelling that into 360-degree rubber-burning escapes.

"THIS IS CRITERION DOING NFS: WHAT DOES THAT MEAN? TO US IT MEANS EXOTICS, COPS AND RACERS. LET'S BRING IT INTO A NEW GENERATION OF PLAYERS AND CONSOLES"

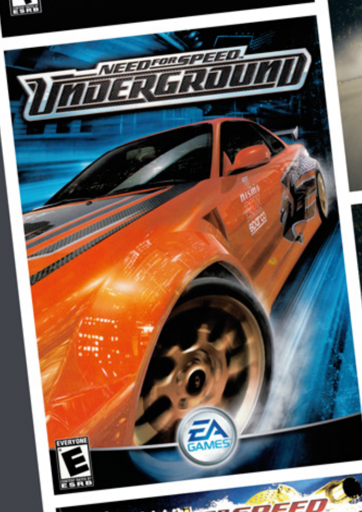
Another shock is how quickly you forget about the controls and focus on the job in hand. Weapons are mapped to the D-pad (though the four we've seen are a fraction of the final arsenal) and your standard inputs of R2 to accelerate, L2 to brake and a face button to nitrous oxide your way out of a car fight means you waste no time getting to grips with a system that hasn't been broken in Criterion's years on the track. Sullivan's user-friendly ethos reinforces the decision: "We take the spirit of the real cars – you've got enough to worry about without 'How do I drive it?'" It's an approach that explains the lack of tuning options, once a regular on *Need For Speed*'s checklist. There's a familiarity to the setup that's like picking up a new Mario title. It's the same and yet also very different.

The transparent HUD – save for a crucial rear view – is kept to the edges and consists of a radar, Heat meter and weapons, allowing the action to do the talking. Though things get hectic as you rearrange the asphalt, it's never so chaotic that you lose your sense of place and control. Fortunately, the presence of licensed cars hasn't stopped Criterion doing what it does best: stopping them dead in their tracks.

We don't see any of the classic *Burnout* Takedowns, with cars crumpling like paper in mid-air, but there is something more surprising: silence. The abrupt end to a 200mph chase, determined either by an escaped racer or a trashed one, is like a full stop punctuating a rapid-fire sentence of clipped corners and whirring sirens. Colour bleeds from the screen, and all that's left is your bruised ego and pounding heart.

Our second foray puts us behind the wheel of the cop car we'd cursed as our antagonist seconds ago. With boosting removed, it's time to get coordinated. Keeping the target in sight and on radar is the challenge, and shoving an EMP up their exhaust is the reward. Timing the EMP – which slyly











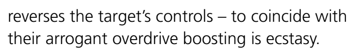
SHIFTING GEARS

Keith Munro (above), vice president of marketing at Electronic Arts, has been with the *NFS* brand since 2002. Munro is central to EA's new strategy to cross-pollinate the virtual and real worlds, having recently announced Team Need For Speed – a collective of real-world professional drivers being recruited to bring brand awareness across a variety of events and media. With *NFS World* set to hit PCs this summer, he talks about the trials and trajectory of the franchise.

Why has the *NFS* brand evolved the way it has to date?
From an evolution standpoint there's been three key areas: birth in 1993, *Hot Pursuit 2* in 2002 and then the move into street culture and tuning with *Underground* all the way up to and including *Undercover*. We had some experiments – with *Pro Street*, for example, though it was a sales success, we tried to bridge simulation and action, which was tough. We learned a lot. *Shift* is an example of that learning – we were very conscious of making our play in the simulation sub-genre.

Now we want to evolve the brand into pillars, creating different games for different consumers, building on the strengths of different developers and their competencies. We need to do this because our consumers' tastes and expectations are changing, just like in other genres. Our guiding philosophy is that we're creating different games for different consumers. We call it 'Need For Speed 365', engaging with fans all year round. Rather than port over *Hot Pursuit* and have that our main play on PC, we want to deliver something innovative in that space [with *World*]. It's an MMO-based racer.

How does *Hot Pursuit* play into this strategy?
We want to make a game that will appeal to Criterion's core audience for sure, but we also have a very large audience with *NFS* – from core into mainstream. We want to capture and inspire both audiences. We've also taken inspiration from shooters – *Bad Company* and *Call Of Duty*, for example. That really inspired the in-cockpit action you saw in *Shift*, to make people feel what the real driving experience is like. We talked about it being firstperson driving instead of firstperson shooting – the impact you feel in a race car is not dissimilar to taking a bullet in *Battlefield*. That inspired the in-cockpit action; it's violent and aggressive. Another thing we took away from *Battlefield* and *COD* is how smart and addictive the online play is. You'll see a lot of that in *Hot Pursuit* – a big focus of that game is social connection. *Hot Pursuit* is their interpretation of what the best *NFS* game would be.



reverses the target's controls – to coincide with their arrogant overdrive boosting is ecstasy.

AI back-up adds a suitable intimidation factor and changes the mood from road rash to frantic manhunt as the environment opens up. The clock counts down when the racer is out of range, though the deployable helicopter claws you back into the battle with some extra tyre spikes. The blast of sound from the chopper hurtling overhead ups the tempo (and heart rate) even further, and the audio design – even at this early stage – plays a major role in the overall dramatic effect. Radio updates of crucial information on the location of your target crackle out of the speaker and hint at the potential for online games, while the grunt of engines underlines every intermission. Going into 'overdrive' as a racer is where Criterion's past lives are most obviously honoured, as sight and sound are tunnelled and the sensation is of guiding a bullet in mid-flight. Dodging vehicles by the skin of our teeth is not helped by the added bulk of the car, requiring predictions as much as reactions.

The immediacy with which we fill up our inventory, meanwhile, is no preview trick, as Sullivan explains: "Within three, four minutes you have all the weapons online, they recharge, so you can use them any time." And we certainly do.

The build-up of your replenished stores is akin to waiting for a shield to recharge in a shooter, or a special attack in a beat 'em up, a comparison Sullivan sees as central to the crux of the genre and his career: "I played a lot of *Street Fighter* when I grew up. I used to live in arcades as a kid. It's interesting you mention that. What I really like about fighting games is you can see over someone's shoulder if they're good. The game has loose enough rules so you can show off. You can win with style or you can win the cheap way. Every time you play, even though the list of ingredients on both sides is the same, you can never have the same game twice. What we're aiming for is a feature set that's flexible enough that the racers and cops always have an option but – dependent where they are, how fast they're travelling, what the traffic is doing – you'll never have the same



Even in this pre-alpha stage, Sullivan's intention to evoke the sense of "a beautiful car advert" is being paid dues by the game's solid vehicle and environmental modelling

situation twice. It's the idea that without any game modes, structures or rules the simple game loop of cops and racers delivers."

Webster, too, is keen on the parallel: "There's an ebb and flow, like in *Most Wanted* where it cools down and then fires up again. You see the balance shift between the cop and racer, those experiences changing around the same two cars in the same two streets."

Brand new for this game, the 3D engine fuses the visual styles of *Burnout* and *Need For Speed*. The autumnal mountainside we tore through could have been lifted from the idyllic upper reaches of *Paradise* while the robust car models and unforgiving gaps in roadblocks are straight out of *Most Wanted*. And some of your first mistakes in *Hot Pursuit* might be made gazing at the cars themselves, beautifully modelled as they are. "It's always been really aspirational – super-cool cars I would love to drive," says Sullivan. "It has to be really contemporary, the Criterion take on *NFS*. We've always made games that are a reflection of who we are at that moment in time. That's why, looking back at the *Burnout* games, they've always changed. We're never happy making the same game again. We owe it to people paying money to offer a new experience. Nobody wants to see the same movie or eat the same food over and over. You can take the core ingredients – that *NFS* has defined really well – and you can offer up a new experience within that. Keeping to the core principles of brilliant cars, really exciting driving and the Criterion style of favouring the player – offering something that in ten seconds will make you feel good about yourself, laugh and play on."

"WE'VE ALWAYS MADE GAMES THAT ARE A REFLECTION OF WHO WE ARE AT THAT MOMENT IN TIME. THAT'S WHY, LOOKING BACK, WE'RE NEVER HAPPY MAKING THE SAME GAME AGAIN"

And who is that player? The danger with a studio crossover like *Hot Pursuit* is that it won't sit well with either camp – will the core Criterion audience be ushered easily from its robust rollcage to the showroom sheen of a branded sports beast? Of all the studios working in the genre, Criterion knows its fanbase. Thanks to its dedication to *Paradise*'s DLC packs and progressive support of the title, the team has acquired an in-depth knowledge of who was playing what, and how the audience evolved. "That was a good experience for us to go through and learn a lot about what people were actually playing in a game," says Sullivan. "When you look at the telemetry, people play certain things. We learned to assume less about what people were playing. We're now tailoring more to what we know people want to play. We're really focused on how we connect people together –



Fight and flight are given equal priority in *Hot Pursuit*, as Sullivan says: "It's about wriggling off the hook, getting away and turning the tables, escaping"

games do that well or badly. It's about how games can be made more accessible to a large number of people. Not everybody is hardcore, playing for 50, 100 hours, and not everyone is casual, playing for one or two hours. Games and the way they're made have moved on significantly. We're at a point where we can get really good information about the way people play games."

"We sensed it when we were doing *Burnout*," says Webster. "The world's changing faster than we can imagine. That's why we embarked on the 'Year of *Paradise*'. The hardcore audience, you're going to hit [them] in the first two weeks. People coming along two years later? That was a new experience for us. *Revenge* is as hardcore as it gets. We expected when we launched *Paradise* that the majority of online players would be hardcore players who wanted to do ranked racing. It wasn't. It was so far away from that. The majority – I'm talking nine out of ten people – were doing the social challenges and hooking up online with friends. We were guessing. It was informed guesses based on experiences, but you know something? I don't want to guess any more. All of that DLC was informed by how people were playing the game."

The intention is clearly to find a middle ground this time. "It's about crafting the experience to as vast an audience as possible but it's also Criterion's take on *NFS* and everything people would expect from that," Sullivan insists. "The sweet spot is not too hardcore and not too casual. People have expectations when Criterion comes to *NFS*. People expect it to be fun, accessible, fast and rewarding. We're not going to disappoint people who come from *NFS* or people who come from past Criterion games."

With such emphasis on communicating with a broad spectrum of players there is, unsurprisingly, serious work going into the connectivity of *Hot Pursuit*. "This is a connected generation," Webster says. "*NFS* hasn't gone into that space – that's something Criterion will bring to this." Then he throws up a curve ball: "There are a lot of people who like indirect competition." The intimacy of the one-on-one duels we experienced is apparently just one part in this tune-up. Sullivan hints at an interesting spin on community ghost laps that's being worked on behind the scenes:

"The future of games is about being able to play friends even when they're not online, when they're in different time zones. We'll be serving up immediate comparisons with what friends are and have been doing in *Hot Pursuit* – people can make their own game loops out of those comparisons." Dry runs against the world's best players is a tantalising prospect for anyone who bears the

"PEOPLE HAVE EXPECTATIONS WHEN CRITERION COMES TO NFS. PEOPLE EXPECT IT TO BE FUN, ACCESSIBLE, FAST AND REWARDING. WE'RE NOT GOING TO DISAPPOINT PEOPLE"



Sullivan: "We'll be proud if people see a TV show car chase and think, 'That's like *Hot Pursuit* – I'm going to play that again'"

burden of straight losses in, say, *Dead Or Alive*, and it's a commendable parry of the learning curve/tutorial quandary that often mires the hard/casual divide. "It's like golf – everyone has a handicap," says Sullivan. The promise of more everything, including online support that – if the matchmaking displays we glimpse are anything to go by – will at least cater to eight players, is also attractive.

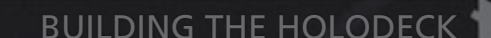
As long-lasting and versatile as *NFS* has been, it's not without its troublesome genes. One of the loose bolts in its make-up has been the cringeworthy approach to career-mode characterisation, from *Underground*'s shamelessly sexist macho posturing to *Most Wanted*'s clichéd badasses and cheese-dunked one-liners. American flavours of B-movie backstory are surely unimaginable in the world of Criterion, where the cars make all the noise. "We discounted that quickly. It wasn't necessary," says Webster, allowing Sullivan to contribute another vivid pitch: "In the heat of a 200mph chase, traffic hurtling at you and driving on the ragged edge, you're not focused on the reason, you're focused because you're shit-scared. Criterion has always focused on that pure second-to-second emotion, realising what that is. Some games need backstory and extra layers; we're making *Hot Pursuit* – the title keeps it simple."

Still in the early stages of its lifecycle (Sullivan describes it as a "two out of ten" measure of the projected final experience), the real challenges may be yet to come. Piling on power-ups is a balancing act, and it'll take a keen eye and a careful hand to get it right first time around. And regardless of the telemetry, there's no guarantee that users will actively take up the challenge of playing offline without a more rigid progression ladder and some killer AI.

"It's not an experience that people have had before," says Sullivan. "There are two sides to it. We'll find out at some point what's more popular. Right now, honestly, we don't know. It's about giving people that choice." But if the balance of the pre-alpha build we've played can be maintained – and going by Criterion's track record you can't help thinking it will be – then *Need For Speed Hot Pursuit* may yet turn out the fastest, most fully featured and ultimately most fun iteration of this often disparate series.



BUILDING THE HOLO



DECK

YOU WANT AMBITION AND VISION? UPSTART PUBLISHER TRION RECKONS IT HAS THE PLATFORM TO PROVE THAT WORLD OF WARCRAFT ISN'T THE BE ALL END ALL OF ONLINE GAMING

It's not hard to imagine Trion Worlds' enthusiastic CEO, **Lars Buttler**, in a meeting with venture capital suits, flashing screenshots and charts in a Powerpoint presentation that illustrates the current profitability of the MMO glitterati, and topping it off with: "Here's how we can do even better". His performance, dedication, enthusiasm, stone-cold salesmanship – whatever you want to call it – allegedly netted his company $100 million to fund three immediate projects and to build for a powerhouse future.

The former vice president of global online at Electronic Arts clearly has his own ideas about the entertainment that could occupy every connected person around the world in the very near future. He's had plenty of practice over the three-plus years since Trion Worlds (formerly Trion Network Worlds) was established to clarify his thoughts. But his intentions were sold on bold predictions and prognostications of technology few dreamed of even four years ago. Now it seems to be on the verge of reality. Buttler is only partly joking when he talks of Trion Worlds "building the backbone of the holodeck". Such statements seem certain to get online gamers to sit up and take notice of him.

You'd think the online gaming arena was pretty well populated. Between *World Of Warcraft* and successful hangers-on such as *Conan*, *Warhammer* and even *D&D Online*, the fantasy space is covered. Sci-fi has *Eve Online* and a handful of plod-along cohorts. Casual gamers are entertained by *Farmville* and *Mafia Wars*. You want action? *Modern Warfare 2's*

evolving persistent state, and similar distractions in *Battlefield: Bad Company 2* and others, can entertain FPS combatants in what feels like an evolving and ongoing campaign world. But what about the strategy gamers? Adrift in deep conflicts among toxic Tiberium fields, their strategic development appear hamstrung by constraints forced by a console controller.

So Trion is taking on all the above. *Rift: Planes Of Telara* (assuming the name survives the lawsuit filed by Palladium Books, keen to protect its tabletop Rifts RPG line) is the bold fantasy entry, led by general manager **Scott Hartsman**, who brings huge experience from Sony Online and its *EverQuest* franchise. *End Of Nations* blazes a trail in the realtime strategy genre, tapping the knowledge and experience of Las Vegas-based Petroglyph (formed from the ashes of Westwood Studios). The final project involves a tie-in with the SyFy Channel to develop an integrated game and TV experience.

Commercial success must require massmarket console saturation, right? Not necessarily, if you believe your original architecture to be the stuff of MMOG legend. That's where Trion sits today, atop its own platform on which three unique persistent-world games are being built. Despite clear confidence in this structure, Buttler remains aware of the challenges and clear on Trion's position. "There is the casual game space that has migrated pretty strongly online into the social and connected arena, then there is the traditional videogame space – the larger, fully immersive, top-quality games," he explains. "We are in the second, the premium-category videogame space. And we want to take those games and make them connected – massively social, fully dynamic."

Attaining that position (and retaining it once any significant success is achieved) is based on a belief in Trion's underlying engine that powers all three games the publisher has in development. "The first thing we had to do was build an entire new architecture, and that in essence is the secret sauce," says Buttler of the Trion platform that powers each game. It's a significant technical achievement, with Buttler claiming that the architecture controls "world data, player data, AI and so on. And all these clusters work together to create the game world".

The upshot is a starting portfolio that hits three individually fascinating areas of the serious massively multiplayer space. *Rift: Planes Of Telara* is a familiar high-fantasy MMORPG that, if you squint a bit, might look rather similar to the genre's big-hitter. Meanwhile, *End Of Nations* is giving the former Westwood Studios staff at Petroglyph the opportunity to bring realtime strategy to a global, connected audience. And finally the SyFy Channel game is a collaboration with the TV network to create an interactive, dynamic game around a world being crafted for a weekly show. "We feel people are looking for something new and exciting," says Buttler. So will he give them what they want?

Scott Hartsman, general manager, Trion Worlds



RIFT: PLANES OF TELARA

Whatever it may ultimately be called, the game currently known as *Rift: Planes Of Telara* appears to be a classic high-fantasy MMOG. That's no surprise given Trion's attitude that the audience is ready for a change from the current incumbents. But really, what ego is at play to think that toppling *World Of Warcraft* from its throne is actually feasible? Well, with egos checked at the door but CVs collected from around the industry, the internal Trion studio has spent three years asking pertinent questions about the genre and, more importantly, about the players. "What is the compelling story? Why are people attached?" asks Scott Hartsman, whose experience includes a long stint at Sony Online Entertainment with the genre-defining *EverQuest* series.

"The first thing we had to do was build an entire new architecture, and that is the secret sauce"

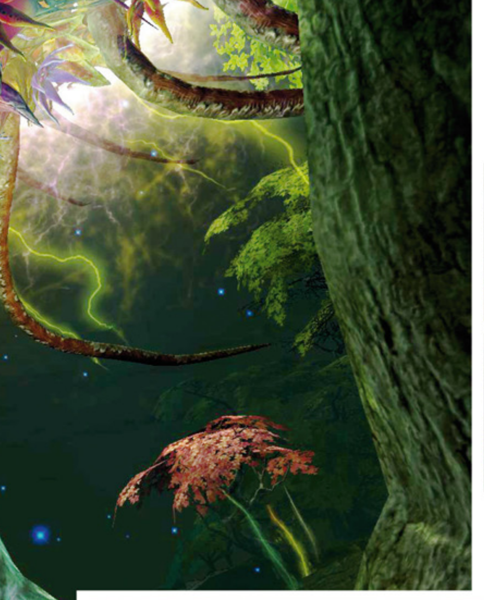
The answers to these questions shape the direction of *Rift*. Massive draw distances, detailed character models and crazy environmental effects all prove that this isn't an ageing, five-year-old MMO. But Hartsman is aware that not every mechanic needs a redesign. "We don't need to spend three weeks of R&D on how bags work, but to focus on areas that we believe can be improved," he says. "We refine, refine, refine and innovate where we need to." Of course, to look at *Rift* on a superficial level, *WOW* players will feel instantly at home. From the format used to display names, to the eight character classes providing flexibility of play styles (they follow the familiar tank, spellcaster, healer types), to quest givers and craft options, the core mechanics build on – rather than reinvent – the structures that have proved successful since *EverQuest* (and *Ultima Online* if you want to take a step even further back in the history of the fantasy MMOG).

Confident in the underlying technology, the development team is able to focus on creating a dynamic world crammed with instances that can change the experience in one simple update. Tears in the world fabric (the titular rifts) are not only visually impressive focal points – shimmering lights creating cascading symphonies of colour – but also opportunities to retain the world's fiction and generate original, even potentially anachronistic environments and events that will keep players on their toes and talking, unsure of what they might see next. What these locations will ultimately entail remains under wraps at Trion HQ, but the tease should be powerful enough to ensure that players feel that the

TITLE:
RIFT: PLANES OF TELARA
FORMAT:
PC
PUBLISHER:
TRION WORLDS
DEVELOPER:
IN-HOUSE
ORIGIN:
US
RELEASE:
2011



Rift **has some clear genre influences, from Tolkien (top) to the stone-built architecture of a certain Blizzard world (above)**







Rift's environments are aiming for a milestone in detail and quality for the often-derivative MMORPG stylings. Whether or not what lies beneath is alluring enough to drag people away from their familiar Azeroth homestead remains to be seen



world they experience on a day-to-day basis could change in an instant.

Hartsman promises thousands of events that will help separate the story and direction behind the two core factions at war in *Rift: Planes Of Telara* – the Guardians (chosen by god) and the Defiants (who aren't convinced this god thing is working). Producing that volume of content requires a sizeable team, and Trion employs over a third of its 100-person in-house team in the design pool. Some 29 engineers are still at work on the platform architecture that's now spent three years evolving from the Gamebryo source on which it was built. Another 30-plus are creating art assets for each area, including expansions along a content plan that, according to Hartsman, currently extends out 18 months from the game's initial release. Given that the internal wiki of the game story goes back 1,000 years, *Rift* is being planned for the long term, with a team that will support new events as the plots between the warring factions unfold.

The *Rift* background not only blurs planes of reality, but possibly even life and death. Part of the origin story involves your character dying and coming through the other side of death to this new world. That means the death penalty plays out in a unique way in *Rift*, where if you die in combat (and you will – everyone does), you'll 'soul walk' and have ten seconds to find a safe location near your corpse. "It's like a second chance," explains Hartsman, and it's clearly as far removed from *EverQuest*'s soul-crushing corpse retrievals as it's possible to get.

Other little enhancements include the ability to loot all corpses at once after a mass battle, rather than click through every dead enemy. Another is a faded-out map overlay so you can see where you are in the world and where you are on the map at the same time, which Hartsman is sure other games will have "already included in a patch before we even ship". These incremental fantasy MMOG changes, including timed instances and battles around the rifts, should serve to give this world a fresh feel for those looking to try something new. More importantly, the strong visuals combined with addressing the lessons learned over years of persistent-world development could attract Buttler's massive potential audience of socially connected gamers.

Building for the long term means *Rift: Planes Of Telara* is better positioned to support evolving communities than, say, *Age Of Conan*, which burned so bright but only enjoyed a brief spell in the limelight. Let's face it, no fantasy MMOG is *guaranteed* to capture even a slightly profitable sliver of the huge potential audience, but the variety of instances and events infused into the *Rift* DNA could keep gamers talking about what they're playing – and that can generate awareness beyond the confines of the existing fantasy MMOG audience.



Trion's three-game roster is no circumstantial portfolio born of simple opportunity. It's calculated to address not only the perceived whims and wishes of the internet-connected gamer, but also the game development community, hopefully putting Trion on the radar of top-tier talent. "It's a love letter to all the great developers out there," says Buttler of the three-game line-up currently in development on the Trion platform. "Those working with new IP, those working with existing IP – on the Trion platform, everybody can essentially leapfrog and build a next-gen game where the risk has been taken out of the technology development, which is really the hardest [part] to do."

Even the structure of this development plan is designed with broader salesmanship in mind. One game (*Rift*) is an internal development project; *End Of Nations* is at an external studio (Petroglyph); and one game is a joint licensed venture with the SyFy Channel. Put these pieces together and they showcase Trion as a publisher capable of handling every significant development scenario. And this puts the company in good stead when it comes to approaching new partners, says Buttler. "We believe that no matter what the technology, it's world-class teams that make world-class games. So we're talking with just a handful of top-class studios. And it has to be a studio that is known and established, and proven to be the best in that genre.

"These games are hopefully great businesses in their own right, but they also showcase what can be achieved on the Trion platform."



The team is aiming for an MMOG with a strong sense of place driven by a story arc about godly factions facing down heathen rivals. It's a fully fleshed backstory that indicates dedication and promises longevity

Lars Buttler, CEO, Trion Worlds

END OF NATIONS

The idea of an MMORTS must look great on paper. "RTS is a category that on a standalone basis used to be even bigger than RPG, but has had no innovation and has been piracy-infested on the PC," says Buttler of the once-dominant genre. Efforts to recreate the intensity and competition infused in those classic PC RTS games such as the *Command & Conquer* series on consoles have been met with critical acceptance but audience apathy. Aside from a powerhouse like *StarCraft II*, which brings a new, massive, *WOW*-powered audience to its existing storied franchise legacy (including, in some regions, mammoth tournaments and pro players with the status of major-league athletes – see p68), the pickings are slim in anticipating the next great strategy blockbuster. It's a shame for many reasons, not least of which is the fact that the RTS genre generated intelligent debate on games and strategy, and managed to become an obsession to so many.

Events such as a global economic meltdown, and the ability of the game technology to support a massive number of combatants, have provided Las Vegas-based Petroglyph with the opportunity to rewrite realtime strategy rules. Our initial demo of the game opens with a world falling apart as economic frailty turns into global conflict and catastrophe. Your role seems small, possibly insignificant, as superpowers and super-machines wage apocalyptic war. But, as the saying goes, from tiny acorns great oaks are grown, and you could be the tastiest acorn.

The dynamic, persistent world is hardly a new concept, but what about 51 combatants battling across a massive city, focusing on their own unique missions but contributing to the bigger war effort? This, too, may not seem like a unique concept, but consider for a moment that the reason for putting 51 players in this world is nothing to do with a technology cap, but simply because that was the number of employees present in the Petroglyph office when the call was put out to send every available body to war.

Each player has a persistent home base to research new technology and manufacturing processes learned on the battlefield. Super-weapons are also part of the arsenal, the kind that change the battlefield in an instant, like when that aerial bombardment hits or the super-tank trundles into the midst of a skirmish. From your war room you can communicate with your guild mates, but more importantly you can watch tournaments and post replays so that you can learn from friends (and enemies) how to better use your units.

Rather than classes, you pick a commander type – tank, strike and artillery – each accessing their own skill trees. Project lead Greg Waggoner asserts that you can even play each class solo, skirmishing where needed, picking off smaller targets as the bigger battle rages around you. Any casualties of war are only lost for that battle. When it's over, they rebuild at your home base, ready for the next call of duty.

In familiar fantasy MMOG style, vendors on the battlefield will provide permanent and temporary buffs, as well as different ammo (in case you brought an armour-piercing shell to





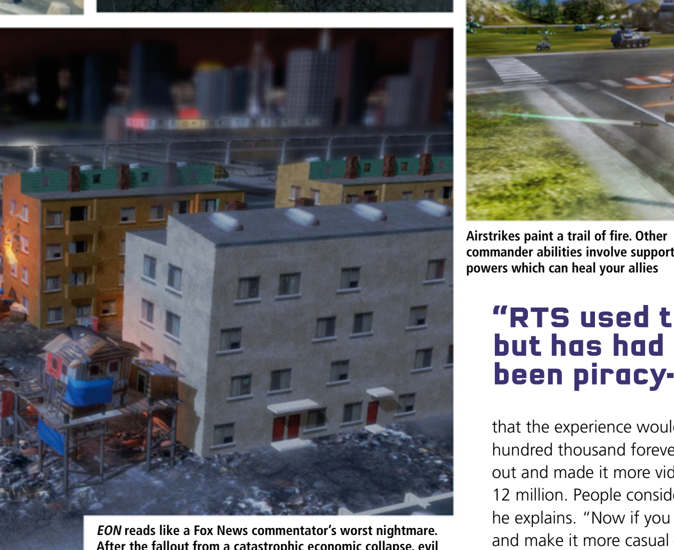
In traditional MMOG fashion, difficult missions will require players to forge alliances that have a balanced set of skills

TITLE:
END OF NATIONS
FORMAT:
PC
PUBLISHER:
TRION WORLDS
DEVELOPER:
PETROGLYPH
ORIGIN:
US
RELEASE:
TBA





Airstrikes paint a trail of fire. Other commander abilities involve support powers which can heal your allies



EON reads like a Fox News commentator's worst nightmare. After the fallout from a catastrophic economic collapse, evil UN-substitute the Order of Nations assumes global control

an infantry party), and even blueprints that you take back to the ranch to research and add to your armoury. Of course, each army is balanced on a points system, and you can take up to 20 smaller units or one mammoth uber-destructor. It all funnels into a game that looks like an RTS, plays strategically like an RTS, but displays all the qualities of persistence and possibility garnered in the classic fantasy MMO realm.

Penalties for unit death need to mean something to ensure you consider the strategic potential of each situation, but come game time, it doesn't seem to matter what kind of units you bring to the battle – you'll still be an integral part of a bigger event.

Anyone who's followed *Farmville*'s uptake among Facebook users, or *WOW*'s adoption across national, gender and generational borders, must get excited at the potential for MMO gaming. Trion has a plan, and Buttler appears dedicated to achieving it. "When *EverQuest* came out, people thought that the experience would be capped at a few hundred thousand forever. Then *WOW* came out and made it more videogame-like and it hit 12 million. People considered that impossible," he explains. "Now if you expand that more, and make it more casual – jump in and out – and take it to other genres, you can produce great things for gamers."

Experience has shown that the MMO landscape can grow, so maybe now's the time for it to broaden its reach with truly immersive online worlds. Maybe then the notion of visionaries building a gamer's holodeck won't seem so extravagant.

"RTS used to be bigger than RPG but has had no innovation and has been piracy-infested on the PC"



Every action, whether it's destroying a single unit or wining an entire battle, will accrue experience points to help your HQ's progression



WATCH WHAT YOU PLAY

You may have heard this story before: game developer partners with TV/movie studio to produce tightly cooperative entertainment experience. Sounds good, doesn't it? Yet despite the fact that TV remains the most powerful media influencer in the world (yes, still more so than the internet), previous partnerships with game studios have toyed with the notion of tight integration without ever exploding in the way a marriage of a hit show and online game could potentially achieve.

Again, Trion is ready to blaze a trail, partnering with the SyFy Channel in a still-to-be-revealed online-connected experience that's designed to intimately tie in to the events on the show. The what, the how and the why are all still to be unveiled, but Buttler is able to reveal some broad direction of how this relationship is currently working. "We're using the same world, same design, the same art, the same races, classes, everything," he says of the asset production and relationship with the TV production crew.

An informed guess is that this project is a sci-fi space opera game. It makes sense for the channel and the shape of Trion's portfolio. Whatever it turns out to be, however, Buttler feels that his team of game designers has contributed to the TV show. "Already we teach each other so much about storytelling and about interactive worlds," he says. "We're creating worlds that are alive 24/7, and you need to be entertained 24/7, not just for a half hour once a week."

In fact, the potential to engage a viewer with the power of TV, then open their eyes to the interactive potential of acting in, reacting to and shaping that world in a persistent setting would likely have most game developers drooling as they dream.

"In our world, that feedback is immediate, and you can see what happens immediately," says Buttler. The story has definitely been told before, but now gamers are possibly on the verge of realising the dream.


HERO: 108 online
beanfun!
www.beanfun.com
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TWO MEN ENTER AN ARENA, BUT THIS ISN'T A FIGHT TO THE DEATH. IT'S MORE IMPORTANT THAN THAT. IT'S STARCRAFT



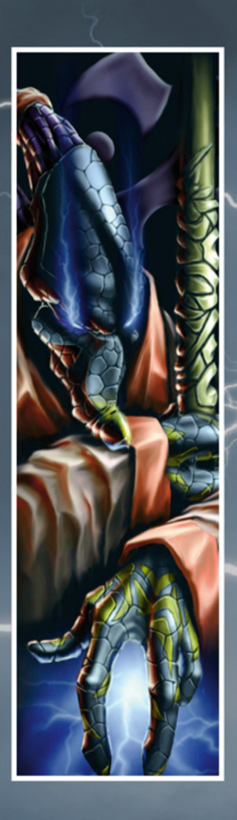
STARS

VS

YellOw

The TV lights come on, illuminating the faces of two warriors about to do battle. The excited chatter between fans dies away, and the hundreds in the audience hush spontaneously. At home, tens of thousands more are watching eagerly as their TV screens cut to a very familiar sight: a pixellated map of alien terrain, two small bases and a few worker units standing idle next to a stash of minerals. Yes, it's *StarCraft*, Blizzard's genre-defining realtime strategy game from 1998, but it's no longer the game we knew. This is *StarCraft* performed by players of near-godlike abilities. The great *StarCraft* player, Lee Yun-Yeol, better known by his nickname NaDa, appears on camera. A roar erupts from the crowd as gamers from 20 countries unite with NaDa's hardcore local fans to welcome one of *StarCraft*'s standout players. Known as the 'Genius Terran' for his mastery of the once-unpopular race, NaDa looks remarkably relaxed for a man about to do battle. His designer-scruffed black hair gleams, and his starched white WeMade FOX team jumpsuit reflects the TV lights. He dons headphones and checks his personalised mouse and keyboard on the gaming computer. Though his fans are screaming for him, he doesn't glance up from his practice map – no sound can enter the gaming booth to distract his concentration. On the other side of the stage, separated by a giant TV screen showing their battle arena, sits his long-time opponent, YellOw, whose expertise using the Zerg race has earned him the name 'Storm Zerg'.

We're three hours from the 20-million-



strong Korean megacity of Seoul, the world's *StarCraft* Mecca, at the first International e-Sports Federation Challenge. There are other games being played – Blizzard's *Warcraft III* among them – but the fans make the trip to the small ski resort town of Taebaek for *StarCraft* alone. While gamers in the rest of the world have all but abandoned the game, and with it the RTS genre, in favour of FPS or MMO games, Koreans are still utterly besotted with a game more than a decade old. Of the 9.5 million copies sold worldwide, 4.5 million were sold in Korea. Children, teenagers and adults flocked to PC baangs (net cafes) to play the RTS game against each other in a mad nationwide frenzy. From the millions of amateurs emerged the world's first true professional gaming leagues, consisting of 12 professional teams vying for the prestigious Proleague title and 300 gamers sponsored by Korea's largest companies to play *StarCraft* six days a week in a bid to be the best of all time. This, right here, is the future of gaming – professionals playing televised matches, commentators judging their every move, fans screaming out the gaming nicknames of their idols, grudge matches between top teams and, for those lucky few at the top, celebrity like that of a rock star. At his peak, the most famous *StarCraft* pro-gamer, BoxeR, known as The Emperor for his supreme skills, commanded a fan club of over half a million people. *StarCraft* is no longer a game in Korea, it's an entertainment industry.

The small pockets of serious, black-suited Korean businessmen hidden amidst the gum-chewing gamers and their cheering fans prove it. These are monied men who believe that PC gaming has a bright future as a televised international sport, just like football. One day, they whisper, PC gaming – already an official sport in Korea and China – will make it into the Olympics – and *StarCraft* may well be one of the games played. But even as these anonymous men plan for the future, a challenge is on the horizon. After seven years of development, *StarCraft II* is nearly here, and Korea's top players and coaches fear the sequel will nullify 12 years of ever-changing tactics and send everyone back to zero once again. But, for now, the original game is at its apogee – the highest point before the fall.

Commentators rev up the crowd, talking about the old enmity between the two top players. Their fame is being eroded by the nimbler clicking skills and faster-paced play of ambitious younger players, but NaDa and YellOw are still revered as idols for a whole generation of fans. At 26, NaDa is old for a player, and YellOw is older still, at 29, but their fame and skill still draw the crowds. The camera plays across their faces. Both are resolute, preparing for battle. At last, the game countdown begins and battle is joined. The game map appears onscreen and both players spring into action. Professional *StarCraft* is a game of nearly unbelievable speed – players must order their units to build a base, prepare defences against their opponent, send out scouts, build base expansions to get more minerals and gas to build a bigger army as well as outmanoeuvre their opponent in a series of darting raids before battle is fully joined. Those who try to do one thing at a time are doomed from the outset. Top players navigate around the map at superhuman speed, issuing hundreds of orders per minute in a miracle of multitasking. That is the mark of a top player, and the gap between a good amateur and a pro-gamer is wider than in most other sports on Earth.

NaDa and YellOw are scouting each other's bases to gain all-important knowledge about what army the other is preparing. NaDa has set up three barracks to pump out cheap and plentiful marines. When combined with a swarm of medics and bolstered by huge numbers of science vessel support units, this build, known as

FIVE PLAYERS AT THE TOP OF THEIR GAME

The very best *StarCraft* players are referred to as 'bonjwa' by fans. Only four players have been considered good enough to earn the term, though Jaedong's current dominance should see him earn it soon.



Lim Yo-Hwan
The Emperor, the king of Terran players, and the man who turned *StarCraft* from an amateur craze into a nationwide entertainment industry. His huge fanbase emerged after he turned the tide for the unpopular Terran race, adopting rapid dropship deployment and guerrilla tactics to win 500 televised matches over his career. Noted for his varied play – from hidden barracks to dropships to marine rushes. He still plays, but his time at the top is over.



Lee Yun-Yeol
Known as the Genius Terran for his expert unit control and use of the biological-army tactic known as SK Terran, where hordes of upgraded marines supported by medics and science vessels cut swathes through the enemy. He was the first player to win three OnGameNet Starleagues, earning him the first Golden Mouse trophy. NaDa's star is on the wane, with younger players surging past him.



Choi Yeon-Sung
Another Terran who was inspired by BoxeR's play, iloveoov became dominant around 2004. He was noted for his seeming ability to cheat, using expert economy management to produce incredible numbers of units, and earning him a respectful nickname: the Cheater Terran.



Ma Jae-Yoon
With fellow Zerg player JulyZerg, sAviOr is responsible for the Zerg renaissance. After BoxeR and NaDa made Terrans the dominant force, sAviOr's combination of excellent economy-focused play with strong micro control of his units took him to the top of the game. His powerful defensive strategies and expertise in the use of the spellcaster defilers are also considered important innovations. But sAviOr is currently in a slump, and is trying to regain his form. The recent match-fixing scandal has threatened his career, however, as sAviOr was named as one of the top players who allegedly threw matches so that betting websites could make serious money. Nothing has been proved, though, and police are still investigating.



Lee Jae-Dong
With a career of 257 wins and 117 losses, Jaedong is the player to beat in Korea. His expertise in winning Zerg-versus-Zerg matches at a time when the alien race is most popular has seen him shoot to the top. His games are known for the vast variance in his tactics, which unsettles his opponents. He is expert in using flying mutalisk groups to do huge damage in seconds before flying away, inflicting the death of a thousand cuts. He is only the third player to win the Golden Mouse.

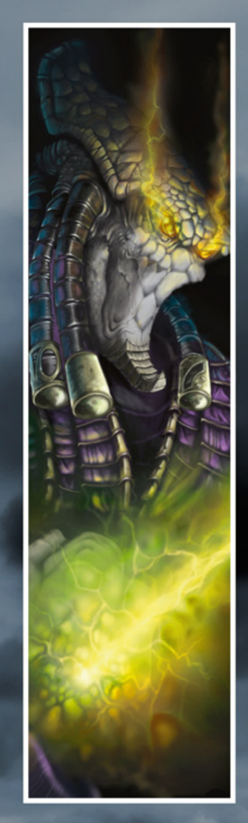
The level of polish and organisation that goes into Korean *StarCraft* tournaments rivals that of western rock concerts. With the money involved, it has to be this way

'SK Terran', makes a hugely dangerous army capable of attacking in the air and on the ground. YellOw knows his opponent's reputation, and is breeding a Zerg countermeasure – vast quantities of zerglings, tiny, speedy critters who can savage larger armies. He sends in an early wave in a bid to bring NaDa's base economy to its knees. But NaDa is prepared. He uses his worker units – SCVs – to counter, sacrificing them to block the entrance to his base while his marines safely pick off the clawed creatures. YellOw pulls back his few remaining zerglings and brings in his next attack – a dozen mutalisks, flying nightmares with splash damage able to destroy buildings and wheel away before the sluggish marines react. YellOw's expert micromanagement skills – his ability to control units in a group or individually – are on show as he picks off marine stragglers. The tension in the crowd is acute, and fans hiss softly at each dying marine. NaDa masses his marines into a tight ball and traps two mutas inside his base. His fans sense blood and cheer. A second wave of YellOw's mutas arrive, destroying a siege tank and anti-air turrets before butchering marines. The commentators chatter excitedly in Korean – it's nearly over! NaDa's face is taut with tension as he defends, using his science vessels to irradiate the mutalisk swarms as his last-ditch marine surge cuts swathes through YellOw's forces. Onscreen, a secret army of marines appears outside YellOw's second base and destroys his worker drones within seconds. YellOw taps out "gg" – good game – and quits in disbelief. NaDa is breathing heavily, the stress of the fightback and battle taking its toll. YellOw sighs as he removes his headphones, disappointment streaked across his forehead. The emotion on their faces – and the faces of their fans – is remarkable. NaDa's fans are jubilant, chanting his name. YellOw's fans let rip with a counter cheer, trying to lift their crestfallen champion. There is no luck to blame here, only skill and speed.

"There's only so much you can do to trick someone really experienced, but if you're faster, you'll have the advantage"

It's no accident that pro-gaming has evolved furthest in South Korea. The nation of 50 million is the most wired society on Earth, with broadband in 19 out of 20 houses across the country and an average download speed of 20 megabits per second (the UK sits at a meagre 3.6 megabits). But why *StarCraft*, of all the games in the world? Many in the industry say the game had the luck to be released in 1998, just as the Asian financial crisis was savaging Korea's economy. Millions of students and laid-off workers needed an escape – and *StarCraft* was there at the right place at the right time. The number of PC baangs ballooned to tens of thousands to accommodate the *StarCraft* boom at £1.25 an hour. Korean culture revolves around the latest craze – a single song from a top K-pop group will play on every radio station dozens of times per day – and *StarCraft* became one of the biggest and most enduring crazes of all time, with literally millions of players vying for supremacy. When Blizzard released *Warcraft III* in 2002, it became a megahit in China, where cheap internet cafes had begun populating cities across the nation. In Korea, *StarCraft* had already taken over the hearts and minds of the youth and *Warcraft III* became popular, but never truly threatened its sci-fi cousin. Korean game companies rushed to produce rival RTS games to compete with the American game, but none could offer the same balance between races, mix of strategies and sheer number of players online, and no one remembers their names now.

Famous Protoss player and StarCraft TV commentator **Nal_ra** (aka Kang Min)

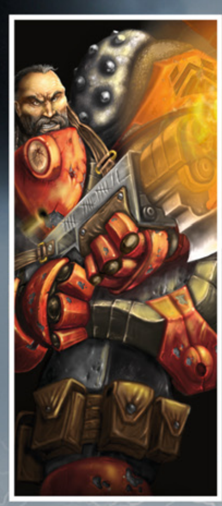


believes the game is perfect for Korea. "It appeals to the Korean personality," he says. "You persevere and never give up – even though it looks like there's nothing to do, you still keep fighting." Sean Oh, the manager of pro-gaming team CJ Entus, believes Koreans are the world's best because of the hours they put in to practice. Top amateurs will practise many hours a day unpaid, and pro-gamers practise 60 hours a week. American player **Idra** (Greg Fields) says that the Korean approach to gaming is very different: "Foreigners focus more on the strategy aspect, trying to keep the opponent off balance, and Koreans focus more on the execution because they practise so much," he says. "The Korean way is much better, because there's only so much you can do to trick someone really experienced, but if you're faster, you'll have the advantage." Idra should know – after winning a tournament in America, he was invited to play professionally with team CJ Entus in 2008. "You can't get this anywhere else in the world, this professional league," he says calmly. "*StarCraft* is big because it has strategy, execution and there's a really high skill ceiling so everyone is still improving. It hasn't stagnated like *Warcraft III*."



Pro-*StarCraft* outside Korea hasn't reached the same level of popularity, but there is a thriving YouTube community posting match videos re-dubbed with English commentary

In Korea, to be a *StarCraft* nerd is not to be an object of scorn – it is to be a hero. Millions of young men dream of life as a pro-gamer, of having every mouse-click analysed, of legions of young (mainly female) fans. Top *StarCraft* players like sAviOr, BoxeR and Jaedong earn upwards of £120,000 a year. But life isn't easy at the top. You must play a minimum of 40 practice matches per day, and individual players practise long into the night, testing out new strategies on their teammates, their fevered hands clicking at up to 300 clicks per minute. The universally dreamed-of prize is to win the most prestigious Ongamenet Starleague and prove they are the best player in the world. Matches in the individual Ongamenet and MBC Starleagues and the team Proleague are shown on two dedicated cable TV channels, screening matches with commentary. Every year since *StarCraft* hit the big league in Korea, more than 100,000 people have watched the StarLeague finals on a beach in Busan, Korea's second biggest city. Legions of teenage gamers sneak out at night, telling their parents truthfully that they are going to John's place, but omitting the fact that John's Place is a cleverly named PC baang. Some amateurs do it purely for fun, but others long for a scarce place in the world's only professional *StarCraft* leagues.



"The players practise six days and have one day off," says WeMade FOX team manager **Paul Kim**. "They sleep in rooms according to their [in-game] race. Here is Terran. Here is Zerg, and over here is the Protoss dormitory." The place feels like a barracks – each player has their own locker, except gaming legend NaDa, who has two. NaDa was the first player in professional *StarCraft* to win a prestigious Golden Mouse – earned by winning three Ongamenet StarLeagues – and his trophies fill several cabinets. Daily life is straight out of a military training manual: wake at 10am, practice from 11am to 3pm, an hour for lunch, more practice from 5pm to 8pm, dinner from 8pm to 10pm and final practice from 10pm until 1am. Those on a losing streak go beyond ten hours a day and practise up to 14 hours. Kim shows us the practice room, where the whole team is engrossed in their games against each other. One hand sends fingers dancing across the keyboard, while the other expertly wields a mouse. They're like pianists, creating chords of





Two pro players from the CJ Entus team play in the 2008 ProLeague. *StarCraft* is often credited with revolutionising the RTS genre by introducing the concept of balanced but totally different races, which has been copied by other games ever since





NaDa (pictured) uses a glitch based on landing a moveable barracks on his own Terran units to force them across an otherwise uncrossable mineral field for a surprise attack on YellOw's Zergs to overrun an entirely unprotected base

keys – select base, build worker unit. But practice is more than just learning techniques – it's about trying to second-guess what your opponent is doing so you can do something different. Psychology is a huge factor in pro *StarCraft*. Many top players soar from the heights into year-long slumps, when their losing streaks make them doubt themselves and lead to more losses. As Idra says, many players never lose in practice matches but once they're on stage, they can't win games. A strong mind and a positive attitude is every bit as important as nimble fingers.

Two of the gamers have been given time off. **Shine** (Lee Young Han) and **Mind** (Park Sung Gyoon) are about as different as two people can be. Shine has wide eyes, a wide face and a wide smile. Mind has a leaner, hungrier look about him, an elliptical face and a reserve born of intelligence. Shine pays more attention to his hair (one way a player can attract new fans, especially female, is to get a hotter haircut) and has chosen a massive, well-controlled mop as his look. He smiles when we comment on it. "Appearance is quite important," he says. "I think I need to go on a diet for my fans because I am quite fat." The two players have similar stories of how they fell in love with the game. When Shine was in primary school he played it with his friends, and then saw matches appear on TV. That was when he first dreamt of being a pro-gamer. "That's my dream, I thought, that's the profession I was looking for," he says. "Ever after that, I strove for that dream."

Outside the WeMade FOX interview room, a teenage boy walks past, bowed down by schoolbag and books. He sees us and bows awkwardly through the door. "That's Baby," says Kim. "We picked him in the draft three years ago, when he was 12 years old. He is very popular in Korea because he was such a genius in elementary school and beat professional players." Both Shine and Mind are 18 and should be at school, but they have been able to trade in their textbooks for gaming and will still graduate. As an amateur, Mind beat team legend NaDa – an unprecedented feat which earned him a job as a pro-gamer.

"I play by dominating the map. If you dominate the centre, you will win. I am proud of that"

Kim tells us that Mind is now the team's top player and is known as General Rommel by fans, after the renowned Nazi field marshal of WWII. Mind is called into action any time a team match goes to five sets and the top players are brought in for a final battle.

At a Woongjin Stars versus WeMade FOX match, Mind gets into action and systematically destroys Ggangyu, a risk-taking, crowd-pleasing Woongjin Zerg. Ggangyu sends tightly controlled waves of mutas wheeling through Mind's base, but Mind coolly defends with marines, mustering a huge secret second army of marines to sack his opponent's second base while the main battle rages. In the next round, Shine takes to the stage, grinning broadly. He's facing Woongjin's Special, a Terran player. Shine fends off an early attack and sends in a massive air attack with ground units hidden in air transporters. Special's face crumples as he attempts to muster a defence. One of the fans appears onscreen – it's Shine's proud grandmother, watching him slaughter dozens of pixellated marines. Wrapped in a pink fluffy coat and old-fashioned hat, she's the oldest person in the audience by some margin.

Professional *StarCraft* is much like chess. Grandmaster chess players memorise the starting moves and save their formidable brain power for the true contest – the middle game. It's the same in *StarCraft*. "For the first half of the game, all of the players know the timing – of building a base and units – and how to play," Mind says. "So you try to optimise it for the second half, when you cannot predict how the game will go on." Just as in chess, the centre of the map is critical – he who controls the centre controls the flow of the game. It is quickest to go from the centre to anywhere else in the map, and speed is of the essence. "I play by dominating the map," he says, blinking slowly. "If you dominate the centre, you will win. I am proud of that."

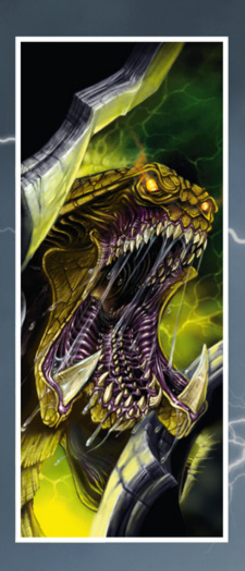
After a 3-1 victory over Woongjin, the players are allowed outside, where their personal fans swamp them in droves. Nearly all of the fans are female, teenage or in their 20s, and they praise their favourite player while offering him a gift of a tasty snack. There's a definite flirtatiousness about the whole affair, and it's not uncommon for a player to date a fan. One of the followers says that she organises fan meetings when a player wins. What do they do there? "We usually



SAvior micromanages his Zergs to keep them on high ground, where enemy shots have a greater chance of missing, while attacking Bisu's cannon before destroying his nexus

FACTS AND FIGURES

Highest paid *StarCraft* player: BoxeR, pulling in an estimated £200,000/year
Beginner pro-gamer pay: £12,000/year.
Number of professional pro-gamers: Around 300
Biggest fan club: BoxeR, with 500,000+.
Clicks-per-minute of top players: 300–400
Cost of maintaining a pro-gaming team: About £14 million/year
Average practice hours per week: 60 (ten a day over six days)
Prize money: Up to £30,000 to win a StarLeague outright
Number of PC baang net cafes in Korea: Estimated at 30,000
Main game played: *StarCraft*
Current top race: Zerg, popularised by leading player Jaedong



ask him some questions, but usually about fun stuff," she laughs. "We ask what he did to win, and then we ask him to dance for us." Dance? Do they really dance? "Yes. They dance," she says, giggling. Shine's grandmother says that she comes to every match he plays to cheer him on. When he first started gaming, she was against it, she says. "I wanted him to be a good student, but now I am happy with his progress and his results in gaming. I am really proud, especially when the other fans talk about my grandson," she explains.

Why is it, we ask Shine and Mind, that this relatively ancient game is still so big? After all, it has 2D graphics, heavy pixellation and terrain that doesn't change even when a nuke hits it. Shine shifts in his seat, thinking. "Over the past ten years, there have always been new tactics created," he offers. "There is nothing the same as before. The game has been created constantly since it began."

Mind agrees. "The game is very speedy and the strategy keeps changing. The three races are really balanced," he says. "There is no one race that dominates for too long." The history of *StarCraft* pro-gaming bears this out. The most famous player of all time, BoxeR, made his name by revolutionising the once-weak Terran race, but since his drop in standings, Zerg players have risen to the top. The 2009 player of the year was Jaedong, who handles Zerg with such deft aplomb that he is now the player other top players fear. Meanwhile, Protoss players Nal_ra and Bisu have done much to restore an overlooked race to its rightful place next to the other two.

Players and coaches from every team say that the result of this constant striving for supremacy is a constant improvement in gameplay. "The game speed has really increased," says **Jae-Gyoon Yi**, the head coach of rival team Woongjin Stars. "Reaction speeds have really shortened. And whenever I think that here is a player who no one can beat, there is always someone who comes and beats them. That's what keeps it interesting in *StarCraft*."



Outside the hothouse of the team barracks, amateur players practise no less feverishly in dark basement PC baangs, the hum of a hundred computer fans merging with mouse-clicks. Some dream of stardom and fans, others have tried and failed and still love the game. "I wanted to be a pro-gamer," says **Jin So Ong**, an amateur player of six years. "But it's very hard. You have to win a competition and have someone coach you. Why do I still love it? It's not just a simple game. You have to think a lot, to practise a lot to get better and have a lot of competition," he muses. "I play Terran and BoxeR is my favourite player. I watch his replays to improve my own play."

"The game is very speedy and the strategy keeps changing. There is no one race that dominates for too long"

But the manager at another PC baang in central Seoul tells us that *StarCraft* is less popular now than during the peak of the boom years: "The players who still play are those in their 20s who work by day now. After work, they come here to play *StarCraft* like a kind of nostalgia."

No other RTS game has come close to *StarCraft* for mass appeal, bar *Warcraft III*'s popularity in China and Scandinavia. But now, after years of being written off as vapourware, *StarCraft II* is almost here. The beta version has been released, and many pro-gamers are nervously testing it out. Why the nerves? Because even though Blizzard is taking extreme care to maintain the crucial three-race balance, the interface is different, the terrain is now 3D, and new units have arrived. For legendary Zerg player **sAviOr** (aka Ma Jae-Yoon), that means every player of the original *StarCraft* must adap. "Anyone who liked number one will love *StarCraft II*. But we must adapt to the environmental change, from 2D to 3D," says the CJ Entus player.

Marketer **Jay Shin** from the Korean e-Sports Association (KeSPA) goes one step further. "It's a new game. Players of *StarCraft* will go to *StarCraft II*, but their ability will be zero. They will be back at the beginning," he says.

Blizzard executives have their eyes squarely on Korea. The Korean market and pro-gaming industry are critical to the game's success – but the developer is determined to grab a bigger piece of the pie this time round. The *StarCraft* industry resulted in millions of extra sales across Korea, but the industry pays no royalties to Blizzard for TV rights. In April, negotiations between the developer and KeSPA broke down, with Blizzard CEO **Mike Morhaime** reportedly saying his company would look for a new partner in Korea. "Blizzard obviously has the IP rights to the *StarCraft* series, but those rights aren't being respected," he said. *StarCraft II* hit another stumbling block in April after the beta version received an 18+ rating in Korea, marginalising the crucial teenage market. Blizzard has vowed to appeal. And late in the same



Effort uses his Zerg drone to delay Idra (pictured) from completing a barracks before sending in a rush of zerglings, ending a game lasting only 2 minutes 45 seconds



STARCRAFT IN SOUTH KOREA: A TIMELINE

1997: Asian financial crisis savages South Korea's economy. The government begins rolling out the world's best ultra-high-speed broadband in a bid to revive the economy.
March 1998: Blizzard releases *StarCraft* to worldwide acclaim. In Korea, it becomes an overnight success as the unemployed and students flock to ever-multiplying PC baang internet cafes to while away the hours.
Mid-1998: First amateur Korean *StarCraft* competitions. Gaming clans grow out of the PC baang culture and amateur leagues begin offering cash prizes to the best players.
1999: Cable channel Tooniverse spots the boom in *StarCraft* gaming. Organising a tournament, Tooniverse screens the first *StarCraft* matches on the StarLeague programme. Tens of thousands tune in, and suddenly *StarCraft* hits the mainstream.
2000: Tooniverse spins off the StarLeague programme into an entire cable channel, OnGameNet, devoted to *StarCraft*. The channel shows matches and replays with commentators discussing tactics. At this stage, there are no professional teams and it's the best players playing one on one.
2001: The rise of BoxeR. Before BoxeR, players aren't household names. But the rise and rise of 'The Emperor' turns him into a national icon and *StarCraft* into a professional sport. BoxeR revitalises the unpopular Terran race, inventing new mass dropship tactics to upset the balance of races and make Terrans supreme for a time. After winning the Starleague, his pay packet soars, eventually hitting more than £200,000 per year, while his fanclub multiplies to 500,000 people. Even now, leading Korean pop bands approach him for his autograph rather than the other way around.
2002: A second competition and game channel launch. The KPGA Tour begins and is screened by MBC Game, another cable channel. Later, the KPGA Tour becomes the MBC Game Starleague. Most players consider the OnGameNet the more prestigious title to win.
2003: Team competition takes off in the Proleague. The previous year, two major Korean telecom companies, KT and SK Telecom, found pro-gaming teams in a bid to brand themselves and connect with a young, wired generation. The unprecedented influx of corporate cash sends shockwaves through the industry and is yet another sign that *StarCraft* has turned pro. Proleague matches run the whole year, and both MBC Game and OnGameNet show them live.
2006: The final five amateur teams turn pro. Of the 12 teams in South Korean pro-*StarCraft*, five are still amateur until 2006, playing for prize money and the love of the game. But now, as corporations like CJ Entus and MBC Game move in, players will be paid to practise and play full time. One team is even funded by the Korean air force.
2008: Two Guinness World Records go to Korean *StarCraft* in the inaugural Gamer's Edition. Pro-*StarCraft* is awarded two world records for the highest-paid videogamer (BoxeR) and the largest audience for a game competition (120,000 people on a beach in the port city of Busan in 2005).
2009–2010: Universities begin offering *StarCraft* tactics and theory courses. In 2009, UC Berkeley offers a student-run course on theory and strategy. In 2010, renowned Protoss player-turned-commentator Nal_ra will begin teaching the art of *StarCraft* at the Seoul Institute of the Arts.
2010: *StarCraft II* to be released. The Korean industry is preparing for the impact of an updated, newly 3D game to reset the clock and send top players back to gaming school. But a massive match-fixing scandal now threatens to overshadow the sequel's release and damage the crucial fanbase.



month, a potentially enormous and still ongoing match-fixing scandal broke after the Korea Times reported that top players and coaches were implicated in shady deals with illegal betting websites. Players as respected as Jaedong, sAviOr and Bisu have been named among dozens who allegedly threw matches in exchange for hard cash. Nothing has been proven, but police are investigating, sAviOr is on indefinite leave, and fans have had their faith in their idols severely tested. *StarCraft II* will have a turbulent birth.

Just under half of the worldwide sales of the original *StarCraft* were in Korea, and the major reason for that lies in the devoted fan culture and amateur players here. Pro-gaming matters, but if fans are disillusioned by the match-fixing scandal, or don't find the game as engaging to watch or play as the original, the sequel simply won't take off. Famous Protoss player Nal_ra tells us that the original game will survive alongside the sequel. "It's been said for the past ten years that *StarCraft* will disappear, but it still exists," he says with his trademark enthusiasm. "E-sports was an industry that no one expected. It was created from zero, from pro-gamers' passion and effort."

Nal_ra is full of life – the complete opposite of the nerd stereotype, with a visible passion for *StarCraft* and for the e-sports industry. "When *StarCraft* first came out, nobody could have expected what happened," he says, half-bouncing on his chair. "So the history of *StarCraft* is of people being surprised." As Nal_ra says, the death of *StarCraft* pro-gaming has been constantly predicted, yet the original has not only survived but has mutated into a fantastical new multimillion-dollar industry. In a world where gamers often exhaust a game within months of its release and move on to the next big thing, *StarCraft* stands up there with western gaming staples like *FIFA* and *Counter-Strike* – games with nearly infinite replayability. For Nal_ra, that's the main reason why professional *StarCraft* exists. "There is a truth in *StarCraft*," he says. "The same game is never played twice. There is no same game."

So even when the new 3D bells-and-whistles incarnation arrives later this year, the original *StarCraft* will not disappear in Korea. Gamers amateur and pro alike obsess over it, watch game replays, dream of defending against zergling rushes. It might seem odd, but the main threat to *StarCraft II* will be its beloved older sibling. In a country devoted to the new, a very old game will survive for one reason alone. Because it is truly great.



StarCraft's age means it needs only a modest PC to run, making it accessible to all, not only those able to afford practice hardware

SOCIAL SCIENCES

CAN THE WORLD'S MOST POPULAR SOCIAL NETWORK CHANGE THE FACE OF GAMING?



Developers the world over aren't envious of *Farmville* because of the way it looks. They aren't envious of how it plays, either, as it casts its mundane spells in a muddle of stuttering loading bars and cluttered menus. No, developers are envious of *Farmville's* player base. Zynga's little agriculture sim took just three months to hit a staggering 60 million monthly active users (MAUs), and the figure now fluctuates around the 70 million mark. "Facebook games have redefined the notion of success," suggests **Sebastien de Halleux**, co-founder of Playfish, one of Zynga's bigger rivals. "Our own top games, *Pet Society* and *Restaurant City*, have 20m and 15m MAUs respectively. Both of them are comfortably bigger than *World Of Warcraft*."

This means that, like *Farmville*, they're big enough to keep an entire industry up at night, pondering a handful of difficult questions: what does Facebook mean for developers,

Illustration: **Army Of Trolls**


HOTEL
ENTER
ENTER
CAFE
YOVILLE
FIGHT

GAMES UNITE



Gravity Bear's auto-brawler *Battle Punks* and Threshold's 3D construction set *TrainSetGo* (above) may not have too much in common on the surface, but they're both running on Unity, the middleware quickly making its presence felt on a platform more commonly associated with Flash. "Unity and Facebook work very well together," says Zimmer. "Not only is it providing players with their first 3D Facebook games, Unity allows you to communicate directly with the Javascript so you can get friends lists and stuff, and you don't have to wait for servers to load because it runs off such a tiny install."

"We're already seeing some of the larger publishers moving in on Unity for Facebook," says Unity co-founder and CEO **David Helgason**. "When we were designing our middleware, Facebook wasn't on our radar at all, but we were definitely thinking of the web as the delivery platform of the next few years. Facebook have had pretty good people working on their app platform, and it means that it's very easy to get code going on there. We've created a fairly low-level engine for the platform, which is really fast and has nice tools for shaders and 3D. BioWare even created their Facebook Christmas card using Unity. In the future we're going to see an arms race in Facebook for the more complex kind of stuff."

publishers, and players in the long run? Is the network a stable enough platform to truly offer a hint of the future of games? If it is, what might that future look like?

At the moment, that future looks rather chaotic, as hundreds of developers, scaling from one-man-bands to corporate giants like EA, struggle to create the next *Farmville*. Facebook may refer to itself as the biggest gaming site on the web (it has more than 100 million unique users across its top ten titles alone) but it was never designed as such, and its journey to that state has been torturous. The recent arrival of a game dashboard has brought a little order to proceedings but, as with that other accidental record-breaker, iTunes, Facebook just didn't see games coming.

Developers did, however, and as soon as Facebook was ready to allow thirdparty applications on to its pages, games lead the charge. "The power of simply integrating games with the social web means we can use the social graph to tap into entirely new kinds of emotions," says de Halleux. "We're seeing games that focus on creation and collaboration. What this means for designers is that you're getting a new, much wider, audience. The Facebook gamer is not the console gamer. It's like when Nintendo realised that if you're selling to the same people over and over, you will quickly start to struggle. This isn't about gamers, it's about friends, and if you look at the internet as a community, there are 1.8 billion friends online."

"THIS IS ABOUT FRIENDS, AND IF YOU LOOK AT THE INTERNET AS A COMMUNITY, THERE ARE 1.8 BILLION FRIENDS ONLINE"

Getting to those friends is already becoming more difficult, however. Although the network's open source code makes the site easy to work with, complaints regarding constant notification spamming from games have seen Facebook stringently updating its terms and conditions. In March, a change to limit how many daily messages applications could send out to their users saw *Farmville* lose four million players in a single month, and Zynga was far from being the only company affected.

Zynga can take it, but for a smaller developer, such shifts can be truly seismic when working with a business model that requires word of mouth. "In the old days, you could put a button on the screen that just said 'invite my friends'," says **Dave Perry**, a veteran designer who has spent the last few years studying the free-to-play market. "One button would hit all your friends. That caused explosive spamming. Very quickly Facebook jumped on that. They really are listening to the users. That means, however, that if you're a Facebook developer, you're coming to work every day and waiting for that next email to tell you what the new restrictions are. You have no clear, simple future where you can just stick with one strategy."

"Facebook is making it harder to do the things that probably weren't very effective in the first place," argues **Phil Shenk**, the founder of social game specialist Gravity Bear. "They're taking the long view, whereas Facebook



Side-on fighting game *Battle Punks* only supports Windows right now, although the Unity 3D browser plugin has been made available for the Mac OS, too









Farmville, the game that's taken Facebook by storm, currently claims over 75 million active monthly users, a number greater than the population of France and many more than the 5.5 million public users of Twitter

developers like to take the short view: they optimise for the present at the expense of the future. In theory, the more restrictive conditions are something I'm in favour of, and in practice I'm mostly in favour of them too. It levels the playing field. You're not forced into spamming walls and that sort of thing. If that stuff was still allowed, it would be hard to compete without doing it."

But even if a developer has an audience, that doesn't mean it will make money. Just as working out how to spread the word on a new title without irritating potential players was an early balancing act designers had to master, today's teams are still struggling with the business of folding real and virtual economies into a single game – a game that, on a fundamental level, has to remain free to play.

That's why, although it's been relatively easy for Playfish to create a game with more players than *WOW*, it's not getting cocky. "Player figures are obviously where that comparison ends," says de Halleux. "Our players aren't paying 12 dollars a month. In terms of monetisation, social games have to be free, so that moves the onus back on to the developer to create additional value. It's not just about things that speed the game up or allow you to get better at it. We try to think of emotional triggers: it's your friend's birthday, maybe you want to send him a birthday cake? Do you want to send him the free one, or something really special? You can't trick consumers into spending money: you have to give them things they'll want."

"You still need the players who aren't spending, though," argues **Jimmy Zimmer**, co-founder of Threshold Games, the creator of Facebook train construction title *TrainSetGo*. "They're bringing people to the game, posting things on other people's walls and doing a lot of advertising for you that game-makers can't do any more. They're also helping to create the content for the players who do pay. It's entirely symbiotic."

Courting non-playing users and baking virtual birthday cakes: Facebook's





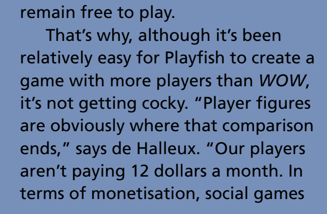




From top, Dave Perry, Playfish's Sebastien de Halleux, John Vechey of PopCap, and Phil Shenk from Gravity Bear



Bejeweled Blitz by PopCap launched on Facebook in 2009, and has since become a downloadable title it its own right. Its tally of just shy of ten million monthly active users might sound a lot, but it's not in the same league as *Farmville*

















Above: Threshold Games' Jimmy Zimmer. Top: Unity CEO David Helgason

audience has required game designers to learn a lot of new skills. "Facebook certainly changes the ways you approach games," laughs Shenk, whose debut title *Battle Punks* allows users to set up 2D fights, which then play out automatically. "When we started trying to make a fighting game for Facebook, I was thinking of it as a huge lobby where you would ping your friends for realtime battles. We quickly realised that 'realtime' didn't fit into the time commitment people have. There's a lot of scepticism as to whether Facebook users engage with 'real' games: I don't think they aren't looking for that depth of experience, but I do think they don't have those large chunks of time. When they're on Facebook, they're usually at work or at school, so what we saw is that the games that require you to commit to any set amount of time don't do as well. You have to be able to walk away at any point. You progress click by click. We call it 4D gaming, because you're always playing with time. It's like trying to build an asynchronous MMOG, essentially."

The MMOG analogy might be accurate in other ways, too. "There are two challenges that jump to mind with social games," says **John Vechey**, co-founder of PopCap, a developer with deep roots in casual, if not social, gaming. "First, the social game space moves very quickly – much faster than any other space that we have worked in. We need to turn ideas into products and get them to market extremely quickly. The second challenge is what happens

THE GAMES PEOPLE PLAY

IF FACEBOOK REALLY IS BRINGING IN A NEW AUDIENCE, THE GAMES THEY'RE GETTING OFTEN HAVE LITTLE IN COMMON WITH THE GENRES TRADITIONALLY ASSOCIATED WITH PCS OR CONSOLES. HERE, WE LOOK AT FOUR OF THE MORE INTERESTING OFFERINGS



FARMVILLE

Farmville allows Facebook users to manage their own homesteads: a largely tedious business of buying seeds, planting crops and then remembering to log back in and harvest everything. In the early stages, the game generally revolves around studying completion meters and saving up for the day when you can buy something really special – pumpkins, perhaps – but Zynga's dark genius lies in the way you can speed up almost all *Farmville*'s mechanisms by inviting your friends in. Brilliantly parasitic, and breathtakingly manipulative, *Farmville* has around 70 million monthly users. It's also the game for other developers to beat.



BEJEWELED BLITZ

Arguably the best game on Facebook, *Bejeweled Blitz* is also one of the least socially intrusive. PopCap's retooled classic doesn't want you to buy pumpkins or spam your friends' walls with job requests. Rather, it just wants to turn your contacts into a hi-score leaderboard and pit you against the rest of your network in weekly challenges. Limiting a single game's duration to a minute brings a new sense of urgency to jewel matching and, unlike many social games, *Bejeweled Blitz* serves as a generous means of advertising for the retail version rather than generating revenue through microtransactions.



PET SOCIETY

The biggest hit from EA-owned Playfish, *Pet Society* plays a little like a 2D *Animal Crossing* as you make friends, tweak your pet's appearance and collect items for their home. Harmless activities like grooming and feeding fill out your pet's day, while microtransactions provide the engine that powers much of the social interaction on offer. Minigames, funny animals and cute costumes may not seem like the most exciting of agendas, but Playfish's easy wit and obvious skill at pulling together just the right kind of pastel-coloured whimsy makes the whole thing surprisingly easy to swallow.



BATTLE PUNKS

Powered by the Unity engine and created by Flagship Studios veteran Phil Shenk, *Battle Punks* is a more violent take on social gaming than many Facebook users may be prepared for. It's a 2D brawler with a deep character customisation system, but rather than learn moves or master combos, players deck their avatars out with weapons before sitting back to watch the fight. The vibrant 3D models ensure that *Battle Punks* is ahead of the curve when it comes to visuals, but it's the design team's lineage in action RPGs like *Diablo* that makes this stand out, and it's already making the transition to mobile phones.





Cafe World (left) is another Zynga game, outwardly similar to *Restaurant City* (above). *Hotel City* (top left) was created by Playfish, and sees players building up a hotel from a few rooms to a five-star establishment

after launch. Operating and evolving socially connected games is a lot of work. We are no longer a company that simply hires designers, producers, and artists. Now we have teams of server engineers, IT experts, and 24/7 service monitors."

With such pressures in force, it's hardly surprising to hear pundits suggesting that Facebook could change videogames permanently. Perry suspects the impact may be fairly localised, however: "Facebook brings a new genre to the industry. I really think that's all it does. New technology comes along, and it gives you new tools. Viral inviting, free-to-play, no download, no install, these are things that are opening up a new genre: a super-casual viral-invite game. Is it the end of games? Are we going to pack in all other games because of Facebook? No. It's a bit sexier than other genres for investors, but we're nowhere near done."

In fact, for the time being, Facebook, with its in-fighting and regular crises, is starting to look a lot like the wider game industry. Rumours that Zynga was threatening to pull its games from Facebook and create its own social network due to a dispute over Facebook Credits (see 'Chequebook') proved unfounded when a five-year deal between the two was announced in May. As game budgets go up and the sheer number of titles available gets harder to navigate, a handful of big players are starting to dominate the landscape in an entirely familiar manner. "As viral marketing is so hard now, a lot of Facebook teams are already coming back to traditional advertising," sighs Zimmer. "Those costs are the kind of thing that will make it harder for smaller companies. A lot of us are now looking for publishers, too. Put that together with infrastructure expenses, and the barriers to entry are going up."

Still, despite many developers' uncertainties, Perry suggests that an industry beset by piracy and diminishing audiences knows that it needs Facebook. "Looking at the Asian free-to-play market is like looking into the future," he says. "Asia is this industry's crystal ball, and everything's digital, everything's free-to-play. Piracy disappears, and it's all about new ways to build revenue models. We're seeing EA and Ubisoft doing server-side authentication, and that's one glimpse of the future. Facebook is another glimpse of how that might look. It's not just the 400 million users that make it important, it's the cleanness of the interface it imposes on designers. The most efficient model for games is click-and-play: no sign-up, play for as long as you like, and pay for the stuff you want to pay for. The secret sauce of social gaming is getting all the friction out of the way, all of the 'are you sure?' buttons and 'accept/decline' buttons, because then you're getting the maximum amount of people through. That's Facebook."

"IT'S NOT THE 400 MILLION USERS THAT MAKE IT IMPORTANT, IT'S THE CLEANNESS OF THE INTERFACE IMPOSED ON DESIGNERS"

CHEQUEBOOK

As Facebook games begin to make more money, the site may well take a more hands-on approach. It's already making waves with its new Facebook Credits system, a unified microtransactions service which sees Facebook taking 30 per cent of the receipts. "By providing a single, cross-application currency, our goal is to make transactions simpler for users, leading to a higher conversion rate for developers," said a Facebook spokesperson when we asked about the motivation behind the system. Zynga is currently testing Credits in some of its games, and is looking to expand the system in the next few months.

"Facebook is smart," says Perry, "and they're going to take a lot of money out of the system. The Facebook Credits are going to start to get expensive for developers because they're going to be making their cut. Current companies are going to be feeling the squeeze next year."

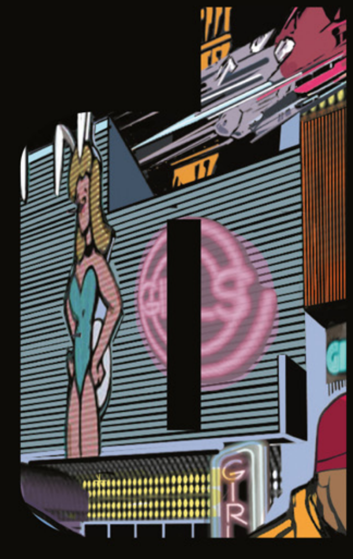
"The word on the street is that Facebook is encouraging people, particularly the big developers, to switch across to Facebook Credits," says Shenk. "That just looks like the way it's going. I'm generally for it as long as it takes off and people start using it. The theory is sound: 30 per cent is a big cut, but they'll be removing a lot of friction to spending money, so it kind of balances out. My only worry is, as there's quite a lot of ways to earn Facebook Credits, that people work out how to game the system and learn lots of Credits very cheaply. We're seeing that already – users with a suspicious amount of Credits – and at the moment there's no way to track that. As long as there aren't too many casualties along the way, Credits look like a pretty good idea."




POLICE





Public enemy number one

Frighteningly powerful, dangerously successful and casually misunderstood: how GTAIII wrought havoc on an open world





While the success of a mere videogame can be counted in dollars and cents, the importance of *Grand Theft Auto III* can only be measured in panic. Like the horror comics of the '50s, the 'video nasties' of the '80s and 'parental advisory' CDs of the '90s, the hysteria surrounding Rockstar's game speaks not to any purported links to crime and depravity, but to its power to set agendas, fire the imagination and shape the minds of its audience. Whenever those prerogatives of the press and politicians become threatened, as they have by works from Lady Chatterley's Lover to The Wild One, the creation of a 'folk devil' is all but assured.

Among the many reasons why *GTAIII* is one of our games of the last decade is its complete (arguably deliberate) ownership of that role. From Child's Play to Driller Killer, Death Row Records to the Rhyme Syndicate, controversy has traditionally been shared within movements – especially by those looking to profit from the transaction. But *GTAIII* is such an arch-provocateur, such a perfect storm of brilliance, innovation, appeal and mischief, that it's stolen almost every headline. Over 4,000 articles have been published about it, notes the Guinness Book Of Records. Rival scare stories about *Manhunt* and *Bully* depend on it. For better or worse, it has shaped the relationship between gamers and non-gamers for as long as it's existed.

TITLE: **GRAND THEFT AUTO III**
FORMAT: **PC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **ROCKSTAR GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **DMA DESIGN**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **2001**

That storm's been rumbling on the horizon since long before *GTA* became a brand rather than police procedural shorthand. For their own reasons, consumers, creators and moral entrepreneurs were waiting for this game ever since entertainment, heady enough as a surrogate experience, got personal in the world of videogames. Which was it? *Mercenary*? *Encounter*? *Turbo Esprit*? *Doom*? When did you first wonder when a game might let you walk the streets of a 'real' place, doing 'real' things to 'real' people, not all of them legal? What would those things be, and what would be the outcome for you, your character and society?

In the winter of 2001, Rockstar answered those questions in ways so complex and revolutionary that previous *GTA*s, though hardly ignored by the press, seemed impotent in comparison.

"The thing that struck me most, once it had gone from very enjoyable top-down 2D to deep and expansive 3D, was that it was unbelievably ambitious, but managed to achieve its aims," says **Alex Garland**, acclaimed writer of books (The Tesseract, The Coma), movies (28 Days Later, Sunshine), the Ninja Theory game *Enslaved* and the aborted movie adaptation of *Halo*. "In my working life, I see ambitions as something important to have, but almost impossible to fulfil. They're like a sleight of hand. You aim at them while knowing you will fall short. Success and failure are then measured by how far you fall short. But *GTA* did everything it promised, and then, as far as I was concerned, delivered more. I don't know if I'd call it an influence exactly, but it was quite arrestingly impressive. Galvanising, I suppose."





Rockstar president Sam Houser on first realising the true potential of *GTAIII*: "It was when I saw a very early 3D wireframe of a carjack. I was like: 'That is it, right there'"

Pimpin'

As useless as most of the qualitative research surrounding *GTAIII* is, you may as well use its mod community to find the source of its appeal. The game's own brand names, lifelike surfaces and recognisable cars have earned much greater interest from this PC crowd than any 'murder simulation', the community releasing new vehicles, buildings and textures via sites like GTAinside.com while its cartoonish violence remains largely unchanged. Indeed, breaking the technical laws (some popular mods affect things like draw distance and colour grading) is an impulse of the game's design, and in turn a way of appreciating the world around it. Despite Rockstar's efforts, this hasn't stopped with *GTAIV*.





Despite having almost no personality whatsoever (he wasn't even named until *San Andreas*), *GTAIII*'s lead character can hardly be forgotten

As you shudder to think of how things could have been had *GTAIII* launched just two months earlier, right before the September 11 terrorist attacks and a frantic period of self-censorship, you realise the importance of timing in its story, tied as that is to the third of those controversial powers, its portrait of reality. Carjacking is surely one of the most important interactions in 3D games, a seamless transition that turned two genres – action adventure and driving – into just one of seemingly infinite scope.

"The game was a dream that many designers had, but no one dared make," says **David Nadal**, president of *Test Drive Unlimited* creator Eden Games. "When we were making *V-Rally* – I think it was *V-Rally 3* – we were asked if we wanted to continue making driving games. My answer was that the genre was always the same and needed renewal, and our idea was that it needed to go outside of the car. It needed avatars. But it seemed too soon and we had no experience of action adventure games, so we made *Kya: Dark Lineage* [a thirdperson action game with unusually deep combat] while still continuing with racing games, so we'd have the technology to unify everything at the end. Then *GTAIII* came out.

"I remember saying to Atari: 'Look! This is possible *now*.' [*GTAIII*] opened the bridge, as it were, and created a mindset. It was the original genre-blender, which I love and is what we're trying to do with *Test Drive Unlimited*, and I thank [Rockstar] for doing it first."

Making its name against the backdrop of the War On Terror, the invasion of Iraq and the infamous Patriot Act, this new experience became an unlikely player in the battle for western hearts and minds. In a decade that's seen unprecedented media and state control over what we consider real, here was an extraordinary threat: a means of escape to a replica reality built, owned and shaped by the private sector, inhabited within months by millions of consumers. In the microcosmic Liberty City, unregulated airwaves fire freely at real-world targets which, like South Park's, seem chosen for their desire to tell us how to behave. Worse for them, a healthy spirit of scepticism and rebellion is carried on the air itself, not to mention in the bricks and mortar. More on that shortly.

"GTA DID EVERYTHING IT PROMISED, AND THEN, AS FAR AS I WAS CONCERNED, DELIVERED MORE. IT WAS QUITE ARRESTINGLY IMPRESSIVE"

To most, *GTAIII* is still just the game that lets you randomly beat people up, shoot them as they try to escape, hotwire their cars and then kill your way out of police pursuits. Nothing new for the series, of course, but entirely renewed by the jump to 3D. Though drunk on the influence of classic movies and peopled with club-handed freaks, *GTAIII* was the point at which games became the latest tool for the architects of social anxiety. It's no coincidence that Fox News, often accused of sociopolitical engineering and producer of the 'reality' show Cops for the last 22 years, was one of the first to broadcast the game's violence at its most believable.





Being one of the first PC series to launch significantly on console, creating the phenomenon of the timed exclusive, *GTAIII*'s visual ingenuity needs no introduction. Proving that texture doesn't have to mean 'textures', nor graphic 'graphics', its illusion of reality survives all kinds of technical hardships by attending to trickier, more creative details like ambient dialogue, camera behaviour and gameworld junk. But to the audiences of network news, reared on negative portrayals of life in local towns and cities, its domesticity was its real breakthrough.

Its characters, though caricatures, weren't fighting on some foreign or alien battlefield with army-issue weapons and hard-earned skills. Nor were they hermetically sealed inside some 2D throwback to the '80s, like Rambo trying to fight his way out of a zoetrope. This was immediate, street-level violence in a universe full of new and dangerous verbs. You *left* your apartment, *went* to the store or dealer and *bought* the gun or baseball bat, even if it meant *choosing* victims ('prowling', to the press) and *mugging* them for cash. Inevitably, this freedom crystallised in bulletins and columns into an act synonymous ever since: doling out cash to hire prostitutes before killing them for a refund.

Add to this the game's somewhat orchestrated emergence as an accessory to various real-world crimes and the notion of the videogame nasty, always a bit wobbly with games like *Death Race* and *Mortal Kombat*, suddenly found its feet. There was the Thai student who stabbed 54-year-old taxi driver Kuan Pohkang ten times before stealing his car, realising he didn't know how to drive, and surrendering moments later



Not everyone approved of the series' post-*III* narrative, particularly the social simulation of *GTAIV*. Progressive on the one hand, it also stands out as part of a series built around physical escapism. For a rampaging antidote, try *Chinatown Wars*

to police, confessing his addiction to a game that, said police, "made it look easy". William and Joshua Buckner, teenage brothers who took two rifles from their home, hid in trees and began firing at passing cars, killing a man and wounding a woman; *GTAIII*, they told investigators, gave them the idea. The three teenagers charged with 57 felony counts in Milton, Georgia (the US state), 'taught' by the game how to throw Molotov cocktails at passing vehicles.

Other examples border on parody. The Nassau teenagers who 'menaced motorists' with a baseball bat and broomstick, then told detectives about the game they were imitating. Or seven-year-old Preston Scarborough, who as recently as last year survived a lengthy downtown police chase after stealing his family car. "How did he even learn to [drive]?" pressed Fox News. "We're not exactly sure," confessed Captain **Klint Anderson** of the Weber County Sheriff's Office, "except that his father has grounded him from one of his videogames which involves operating vehicles." "Something like a *Grand Theft Auto*, something like that?" "I have no idea. I didn't ask… but some of those videogames are pretty realistic." It was left to Preston, appearing on NBC's Today Show, to speak the truth: "Watched my mom. Watched my sister." His father, meanwhile, had rather sweetly mistaken the police sirens for a videogame.

"*GTA*'s provided a wealth of precedents which add some certainty to future legal decision-making," says **Chris Bennett**, a partner in videogame law specialist Davis LLP, and author of its popular Video Game Law Blog. "Some would argue that Rockstar's the perpetrator in this because it initially claimed that Hot Coffee [the mod that exposed sexual content left in the code of *San Andreas*] was the work of hackers – which was, in a sense, correct. It's added sex to a mix previously concerned with violence." The bottom line in every such furore since time immemorial:

"THE FOCUS WAS TECHNOLOGY, NARRATIVE, GRAPHIC WIZARDRY AND PROFIT. BUT NARY A WORD ABOUT ITS CULTURE OF VIOLENCE"



The evolution of Liberty City could also be considered the evolution of streaming from DVD, this being a key element of *GTAIII* on PS2, creating an open world with an absence of grinding loading delays. "It was very, very challenging to make all that work but it's to the credit of [Rockstar North technical director] Adam Fowler," recalls Sam Houser. "He's a wizard, but he doesn't make a whole lot of drama about it – he just gets on with it"



Not since *Mercenary* and *Midwinter* – and never to this extent – had players learned their way around a gameworld primarily through noting its landmarks

Scene it

***GTAIII*'s mark on the movies is as cryptic as its influence elsewhere. There's the one true homage: the literally heart-pounding Jason Statham vehicle Crank, labelled by several baffled critics as simply "implausible". There's *Gangstas Iz Genocide*, the 'game' mocked-up by the always-polemical Spike Lee for his moralistic heist movie The Inside Man, played by a kid anaesthetised to the violence all around him. "[It] is an absolute statement about my horror at how violent these games that young kids play are, and also the infatuation with violence and gangsta rap among the black community," Lee said to The Guardian, implying a more specific beef with *GTA: San Andreas*. You could argue, however, that the game's antics in urban playgrounds resonate the farthest, from comic book fare like Spider-Man and The Incredible Hulk to action flicks Live Free Or Die Hard and The Bourne Ultimatum.**

"The games aren't intended for kids, though, and shouldn't be an issue if parents pay attention."

GTAIII's misogyny is hard to dispute but, much like *Resident Evil 5*'s ethnic stereotyping and the equally pilloried *Night Trap* (the 1992 FMV game in which vampires descend on a co-ed slumber party), it's also fed by umbilical ties to movies, crime novels and comic books. More relevant is the role of modding in the equation, a culture which exploded once the game arrived on PC, and has hopped between almost every open world since, from *Oblivion*'s Cyrodiil to *Test Drive Unlimited*'s Oahu. It's an issue which, thanks to renegade US attorney Jack Thompson, returned to haunt *The Sims 2*, mods for which revealed genitals to rival those of Barbie, but raised questions about authorship and ownership. That game's apparent crime, again, was its closeness to the home.

And that, traditionally, is about as far as 'debate' over *GTA* has stretched. In this partisan battle which has been almost entirely self-serving, vilification and validation are the sole conflicting aims. "I've read reviews in publications as diversely respectable as the New York Times and Daily Variety," writes **Stuart Fischoff**, editor of the Journal of Media Psychology and Emeritus Professor of Media Psychology at Cal State, LA, on his blog. "Curiously, the focus of commentary was technology, narrative breadth and complexity, graphic wizardry and the likely gazillion-dollar profit for its publisher. But nary a word about its culture of violence. Nary a word.

"In a parallel universe, but just as curious, I've never heard a psychologist or serious-minded media critics, discuss the game without launching a spittle-rich rant on the obscenity of the game and its cousins, all promoting murder, rape, torture, cop killing, etc." Both perspectives, he advises, "can use a little tempering and sensitisation." (So, you might argue, could his generalisation.)

To put it another way, somewhere in the heart of Liberty City, deeply hidden like some collectible item, is the truth that much of what we assume about *GTA* is actually false. There's the trifling stuff, for starters: that this uniquely troublesome product of the videogame era is, in fact, just another milestone for an anarchic Scottish post-punk movement which, prior to this medium, got its kicks from comic books like 2000AD and Crisis, spawning world-renowned creators like Grant Morrison and Ian Kennedy, and which continues through 'hooligan simulators' like *APB*, *Crackdown* and *State Of Emergency*.

Then there's the media-fuelled assumption – hardly helped by Rockstar's self-professed reticence on the matter – that *GTAIII* is a game that tacitly, or BASE-jumpers, which is where *GTA* and its progeny, from *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* to *Prototype*, come in.

"When designing kindergartens it's common for architects to consider the building as part of creative play, actively encouraging children to explore and constructively misuse their environment," suggests **Geoff Shearcroft**, co-founding director of AOC, a London-based practice of architects, urbanists and cultural interpreters. "Regrettably, this attitude rarely makes it into other public buildings or the city as a whole. *GTA* demonstrates that it's possible to design publicly accessible, suggestive environments that can accommodate a vast range of individual approaches, allowing a diverse range of users to enjoy unpredictable encounters."

Merrily debunking another myth that



"GTA DEMONSTRATES IT'S POSSIBLE TO DESIGN ENVIRONMENTS THAT CAN ACCOMMODATE A VAST RANGE OF INDIVIDUAL APPROACHES"

prematurely, teaches kids how to be adults, whereas in fact it reminds adults how to be kids. Is beating the loose change out of its cartoon characters really any different to pummelling a piñata once you've swept up all the sweets? Breaking laws to discover consequences is, after all, a child's way of understanding its world – and as free-roaming virtual citizens we're still learning to walk. To understand any world – the urban world, in particular – you have to engage, challenge and occasionally even invert it. Not all of us, though, have the balance or balls to become skateboarders, free-runners *GTA*'s cultural relevance exists solely in baiting the tabloids, Shearcroft adds that its environment, evolving through our visits to Liberty City, is vitally different from the world it apparently clones, exerting its own potential influence.

"For over a century New York has prompted architectural fantasies of vertical living yet the ground place continues to dominate. In its full three-dimensional glory *GTA* allows us to experience the city at every level. Perhaps most intoxicating are its opportunities for fatal experiences; after images of people freefalling from the burning twin towers we can now experience our own fatal freefall from any of New York's heights. This changes the way we want to look at the city."

Furthermore: "Anyone passing through Times Square is distinctly aware of the moments when inert, dark buildings give way to the iconography of attached electric and printed billboards. In *GTA* the buildings have the same equivalence, the same level of presence, as billboards, screens and adverts. Steel, information, glass and lights become a continuous rendered soup, an intoxicating surface experience that imagineers, advertisers and architects could only previously imagine. This



Perhaps the ultimate irony of *GTA*, not to mention *Mafia*, *Test Drive Unlimited* and *Driver: Parallel Lines*, is that obeying the law despite the urge not to can see the game at its most enjoyable. Nothing feels more subversive than conformity





Cars are eminently disposable in *GTAIII*. There's a greater sense of attachment to a fully loaded rifle



GTA's loyalty to RenderWare is remarkable given the engine's technical and aesthetic limits. To its credit, its flexibility led to sequel *Vice City* just a year after *GTAIII*

seamlessness of experience is beginning to infiltrate buildings, in part as a result of the digital means of production but more significantly as user expectations evolve. The game has offered a challenge to the designers of our future cities to accommodate, rather than dictate, individuals' needs and desires."

There are other misperceptions that warrant more space than we have here, testifying not just to the depth of *GTA* but how its leap into the public sphere has left that consciousness baffled, even in the learned minds of gamers. It is not some monolithic enterprise but a deeply personal one, moving with the trials of Rockstar co-founder Sam Houser in particular. It is not a game of death and destruction but life and construction, owing as much to *SimCity* as oft-cited ancestor *Body Harvest*.

The game's days as the greatest folk devil of its time are thankfully numbered. Power and controversy go hand in hand with a consistent lifespan. In this sense, incorporating all the subsequent episodes, *GTAIII* might not just be the game of the decade, but a game of *a* decade. Thirty years after I Spit On Your Grave, movies of its ilk air pre-watershed on cable TV to a nominal and numb demographic. Just eight years after the aptly named Power, Ice-T starred in Frankenpenis, a porno spoof starring a 'post-op' John Wayne Bobbitt, and it was largely downhill from there. Ice Cube's trajectory is too terrible to recount. The crimes of *GTA* will seem equally comical in generations to come, in a world it changed forever.

Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Edge's most played

Monster Hunter Tri



Team **Edge** has been suiting, booting and a-hunting. Sure, there are all sorts of important tactics, but mostly we just enjoy whacking things repeatedly. It seems to work.
WII, CAPCOM

Homerun Battle 3D

A simple baseball game that's excellent online, and seems to be populated entirely by Koreans at 3am. We're game – this next ball's going straight out of the park.
IPHONE, COM2US

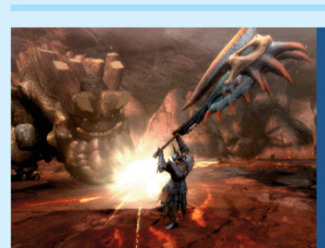
Halo 3: ODST



Overlooked in last month's hat-trick, Firefight deserves an honourable mention. Our election night: Radio Five Live and Crater on Heroic – humanity kept its seat.
360, MICROSOFT

We speak (over Xbox Live)

How even the biggest games fluff the basics



Hitting a blunt surface repeatedly with a hammer – this is kind of what we feel like whenever starting up ye olde hunt. You have to actually arrange meetups outside of the game, such is the uselessness of the in-game tools

There's no doubt that *Monster Hunter Tri* is a great online experience: killing something massive is just better with friends. Team **Edge** has been barrelling around, prancing in the bar, carving up monsters and making them into hats all month.

There's a sour note to the experience, though. Getting into a game is a disgrace. Load up, press start, pause, press button again, pause, press button again, pause, press right, press button, long wait as you finally start logging in, then another screen to click through, then another, then another, then another. Finally, you're in – except, if you're playing with friends, only now are you allowed to warp to where they are. So: another loading screen. From the Wii 'warning' notice to getting into a city, you'll press the button a minimum of 14 times.

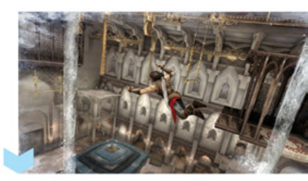
The catalogue of errors doesn't end there. The game doesn't notify you when your friends come online. You can't check whether your friends are online when in singleplayer mode. Want to message your friend who's playing online, perhaps to suggest a meet-up later? You can't do it if they're in a quest – only in the brief gaps between. Just think about that for a moment. Wii Speak performs atrociously, meaning that every time our posse sets out on a hunt we're chatting via an Xbox Live party.

The real kicker? This is Nintendo's big Wii online title, and it's like something from ten years ago. Compare it to *Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker*, which is obviously inspired by the PSP *Monster Hunter*s, but weaves its online offerings through the main fabric, splitting them into distinct and easily accessible options.

Peace Walker isn't just a game that *can* be played online, it's a game that *demands* to be played online, making everything in singleplayer, co-op and versus co-dependent. Picking between a solo sneaking mission and playing against others is one menu choice and a button press – it's hard to imagine how it could be easier.

In this company, *Monster Hunter Tri* looks like a relic, and it's bizarre to see the attention to detail in other parts of the game compared to the incompetence of its initial interface. But there's no great moral here. After all, Team **Edge** perseveres, knowing it's all worth it.









Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three,
4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven,
8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



RED DEAD REDEMPTION

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PS3 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: ROCKSTAR **DEVELOPER:** ROCKSTAR SAN DIEGO
PREVIOUSLY IN: E203, E212, E214









The rules of cow herding aren't particularly well defined. At times the AI takes care of itself, at others it resists every move you make. Firing in anger earns a "You killed a cow" fail screen

Silence, broken with a gunshot. It's the way of things in westerns. Mexican stand-offs, duels at noon, the bandit pursued across the desert; movies teach us that everything ends with a bullet. Rockstar understands this, and certainly understands bullets. Lead in *Red Dead Redemption* hits hard. It's a combination of noisy, mechanical guns and, in Euphoria, a physics engine that plays along. Bullets snap heads backwards and rip men from the saddle. *GTAIV*'s modern weapons spit bullets like angry hornets until a health circle depletes; here, lives end in uncompromising fashion. For the western aficionado, it is viciously accurate; for the fan of wanton sandbox carnage, it is comically frank.

The distinction between hoodlum and gunman separates *Redemption* from *GTA*. Violence is a trade, a skill to be revelled in. Guns are surgically accurate. Yes, plugging a sheriff from the other end of town makes slaying a doddle, but Lee Van Cleef could make the shot, so why not? Dead Eye – a slow-motion aim (and one of few remnants of *Red Dead Revolver*) – puts gunplay on a pedestal. Painting shots on to targets lets you clip ankles from underneath fleeing bandits or pick flocks of birds from the sky. Euphoria lives up to its name in these sepia-tinted moments: the sight of a glinting knife tumbling from a crumpling sex fiend's hand is poetically vicious. And it is no coincidence that the populace are decked out in elaborate hats – nothing hammers home an abrupt death better than a bowler hanging above a cloud of red mist and no head.



Once hitched to a post, a horse will stick with Marston throughout the game. Breaking wild horses – catching them with a lasso and balancing through the bucking bronco task (pictured) – can result in faster or more efficient steeds

The promise of gunplay is enough to fill Rockstar's open plains and dusty towns. The game is built on a perpetual cycle of anticipation and release. The overarching tale is one long build-up as John Marston works towards collaring the gang he once rode with, and every mission along the way is this on a smaller scale. You are always riding towards action: ambushes, occupied fortresses, hangings, horse thieves and executions. The guarantee of even a few seconds of noisy mess justifies galloping past miles and miles of digitised rock. A good thing, too, because, while fun, horse riding isn't enough by itself. Considerably easier than driving *GTA*'s cars, skill goes no further than staying on paths for a speed boost and regulating giddyups to avoid wearing the nag down. Years of Epona action does us proud.

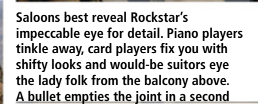
Missions aside, violence has a way of finding Marston. Optional side tasks spawn in the world around him. A healthy range – everything from preventing a lynching to transporting dynamite to (yes) flower picking competitions – keeps these events from growing repetitive in the way *Assassins Creed*'s similar occurrences did. Rockstar even manages to play with expectations by using crying women – often a sign of an incoming mission – to lure you into ambushes. Among the random encounters are scripted 'stranger' encounters, and like *GTAIV*'s most of their tasks are simple 'go here' or 'get that' scenarios, but a few – an enigmatic man in black and a hapless travel writer – are spun out well over the course of



Of all *Redemption*'s inhabitants, the furry ones are the deadliest. Allow a bear to down your horse and your survival rate drops dramatically. Animals come fast and from too many directions to target them all







Saloons best reveal Rockstar's impeccable eye for detail. Piano players tinkle away, card players fix you with shifty looks and would-be suitors eye the lady folk from the balcony above. A bullet empties the joint in a second







Dead Eye massively swings combat in your favour, but is limited by a fast-depleting meter. It refills slowly over time or with an accurate headshot. Alternatively – and unexpectedly – whisky can be swigged for a refill

the adventure. And there's a mischievous glint in Rockstar's eye when more laborious tasks end with a cheeky punchline.

Despite this world being physically emptier than Liberty City, Rockstar proves far better at guiding your eye to the relevant parts. Games of skill and chance (see 'For a few dollars more'), bounty hunting, horse breaking and night watching turn settlements into bustling minigame hubs. Hunting and sharpshooting challenges let you appreciate the makeup of the ecosystem. A grand treasure hunt has you scouring the landscape, that ever-elusive wonky tree taking you off the beaten track. Should these ambient asides prove dull, missions can be replayed (a *Chinatown Wars* design that should be standard) and bandit hideouts are repopulated for a quick blast. Unlockable costumes and hideout time trials reveal a Rockstar far more comfortable with letting unrealistic game convention blend with its finely honed worlds. Still 'living, breathing', sure, but with a bit more spring in its step.



A healthy range – from preventing a lynching to transporting dynamite to (yes) flower picking – keeps side tasks from growing repetitive

That said, life is perhaps a little easy in the old west. Some in-game systems get a touch lost along the way. The focus on skinning animals rarely comes into play outside of specific missions and pursuing character upgrades. A hint of an economy – pelts sell better where those animals aren't readily available – seems redundant in a world where money is rarely a problem. The same goes for morality. Helping strangers earns you store discounts; murdering innocents lines your pockets faster. Echoing *Fable II*'s similar reputation system, nothing is permanent. Shoot a train driver and murder his passengers as they spill out into the desert, and you need only give rides to three old ladies for all to be forgiven. Flexibility allows Marston to have his 'off days', but the easy sway makes it rather pointless.

There are oddities in story missions, too. Gone are the fist-gnawing difficulty spikes that plagued *GTA*, only to be replaced with plain-sailing flat areas. Swarms of AI buddies turn climactic rushes into battles for kills and judicious use of Dead Eye allows entire enemy waves to fall at once. Fully fledged mechanics pop into existence for the length of a tutorial: 20 seconds rigging a road with dynamite, or a stealth mission lasting the deaths of five men. Why do the good ideas have to die young while the lousy gun turret – clumsily churning bullets at enemy formations learned by rote – is cranked up again and again? It will also be argued that the concluding section of the game, while dramatically neat and surprising, proves a little anticlimactic. After 20 hours spent amassing a killer arsenal, opting for subtle viciousness will jar with some players.

But this sandbox extends beyond the tale's natural climax. If the story leads us through well-trodden territory – blending The Good, The Bad And The Ugly's adventurous sweep with Unforgiven's morality, as played by Deadwood's perverts and bigots – the greater game is more digitised Westworld: an impeccable example of world building begging to be interrupted with a bullet. As one character notes: "I dreamt of documenting the last days of the old west. The romance, the honour, the nobility! But it turns out it's just people killing each other." There's no shame in that. **[9]**

For a few dollars more



Games and sports are a good means of bolstering your kitty early on. Poker and blackjack are competent distractions, but for our money, Liar's Dice provides the most fun. It is not so much the game itself, in which players predict and bluff about the values of hidden dice, but the gruff soundbites as the weathered faces around the table gloat/moan about duping/being duped. More adventurous types can compete in five finger fillet – hitting button cues against the clock to dance a knife between the digits. Spoils in hand (if you still have one), the gunman of leisure can spend his earnings on booze (replete with *GTAIV*'s raucous slur-o-vision) or learning about the dangers of women's liberation from a silent movie at the local picture house.



METAL GEAR SOLID: PEACE WALKER

FORMAT: PSP **RELEASE:** JUNE 17
PUBLISHER: KONAMI **DEVELOPER:** KOJIMA PRODUCTIONS
PREVIOUSLY IN: E204, E208





Increasing the abilities of a team unlocks weapons or items related to their field, which can then be developed while in missions. There is a wealth of possible tools, though we confess to a penchant for really powerful rocket launchers

Here we are again. Back to the Cold War. Back to the CIA and KGB, nuclear missiles, gruff spooks, bipedal mechs and a dead soldier called the Boss. Back into the tortured, twisting lives and initialisms of *Metal Gear* canon. And, in what must be one of Naked Snake's trickiest missions, back to revitalise Sony's PSP.

Focused on the past it may be, but *Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker* is no relic. On the contrary, it's the most considered and forward-looking entry this series has seen since its 3D debut: a bona-fide *Metal Gear* (and then some) and a game that's brave enough to simply swipe and adapt what works best on handheld platforms. But perhaps *Peace Walker*'s greatest achievement is showcasing a new mastery of form from Kojima Productions in terms of what surrounds the main game – this is no solo sneaking mission, but a ballooning combination of mission and metagame yoked to omnipresent online functionality. Formalising *MGS* into discrete chunks and letting it loose in five- to 30-minute snatches of pure play (excluding cutscenes, naturally), *Peace Walker* threatens to break free and not only set a new standard for the series, but for handheld gaming as well.

The main campaign is the familiar formula, a linear route of mini-sandboxes you gradually sneak through, every so often retracing your steps or listening to a villain ruminate on haircuts. The environments are perhaps a little less open than you'd expect, but they're gloriously realised in the form of lush jungle, its variegated leaves hiding ghillied soldiers, broken by cramped urban outposts where you can almost feel the damp in the concrete. *Metal Gear*'s always been about planning before execution, and the controls encourage this with a definite rhythm as you switch tack, concentrating on edging into the right position, stopping and sorting through your kit before getting your aim just right or setting a trap. Then pressing that button, and waiting for the resumption of silence or the beginning of chaos. The default layout works superbly after the initial acclimatisation – let's remember we're playing on a PSP here – and the options allow you to nudge sensitivities to just the right level or reassign everything. Crouching, crawling, aiming and holding your breath as it all comes down to a trigger squeeze: what a testament to Kojima that this *Metal Gear* fundamental survives unchanged, albeit refined over 12 years and several platforms, and still gives you goosebumps.



There's so much right with Peace Walker. It shines a light on the paucity of ambition we've come to expect from PSP titles and holds its head high

But *Peace Walker* is no navel gazer. Who'd have thought there'd be such a massive influence from PSP *Monster Hunter*? Or *Pokémon*? The basic principles, which have always worked well on a handheld, are collecting things and persistent levelling. You learn pretty swiftly that throughout *Peace Walker* you'll be constructing Outer Heaven (the organisation infiltrated by Solid Snake in the very first MSX2 game), and this takes the form of recruiting soldiers, assigning them to various groups, and sending them out on missions. Soon you're constructing a Metal Gear of your own from the scrap you can knock off bosses with location-specific damage, your base is expanding, and you're pouring huge amounts of money into building tools that directly affect missions (and a banana that's slightly less integral).

Soldiers are the currency of *Peace Walker*, appropriately enough, and are integrated everywhere. The best idea of *Portable Ops* was also its worst – kidnapping enemies was unbelievably tedious. So here you knock them out, and instantly send them back to base with a skyhook – simple, rewarding, and a useful in-mission tool (knocked-out enemies wake up). Or you can make use of real-world Wi-Fi hotspots for quick one-shot challenges that reward you with more soldiers. Trade with other players. Acquire volunteers. It's a constant drip-feed of little faces and abilities (even Kojima crops up, with the highest Intel stat in the game), and the urge to increase your team's abilities and begin work on that new sniper rifle is irresistible. The Outer Ops, in which you send teams to troublespots around the world, almost brings to mind *X-COM* – but don't get too excited. It's a little too basic, and the rewards are a little too insubstantial, to quite hold its own in such polished surroundings.

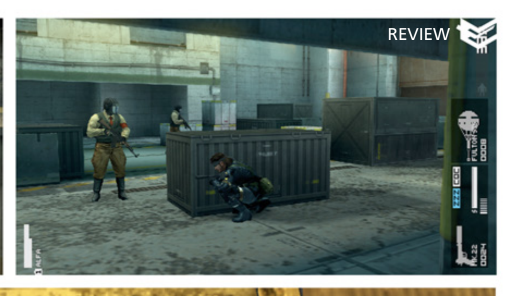
But *Peace Walker* isn't all plain sailing. The biggest disappointments, surprisingly, are its bosses. There's no Cobra unit here, and



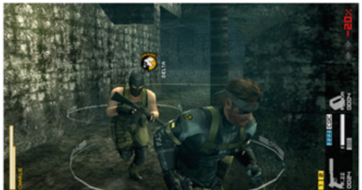
A word for the simplified close-quarters combat: while no match for that in *MGS3* or *4*, it's effective, lets you easily take out multiple targets, and is a more important part of your arsenal than any gun











Unfortunately, the servers were empty while we were reviewing *Peace Walker*, so all co-op was local and infrequent. It's clear from the way missions are presented that this is designed to be online and played with friends

Versus mode will be familiar to veterans of *Metal Gear Online*, not least because any pretence of stealth goes out of the window as soon as the game starts



no human bosses throughout – every big fight's against a vehicle or a mech. It's not outrageous to say that the most memorable moments from *Metal Gear*s past are nearly all connected to human opponents, and their absence is keenly felt. It's especially odd that the one area in which Kojima's designs are consistently brilliant isn't a part of *Peace Walker* – and a definite loss.

This may be why the storyline ends up being unsatisfying. There are all the usual double-double crosses, gravelly voiceovers and pontification on the nature of war and nuclear power, but without a strong antagonist it flails a little. In *Peace Walker*'s determination to play its part in *Metal Gear* canon it risks boring anyone not obsessed with the minutiae, and prioritises the wider fiction over having a strong, standalone tale. That's not to mention the fact that handheld games simply shouldn't have cutscenes of the type that bookend many missions here, regularly topping the ten-minute mark. There are high points, of course, particularly the (deliberately) farcical final act and lines like "He must have used his prosthetic as a blowtorch to escape the cell". If you hadn't noticed already, it's obvious that the series is eating its own tail rather than moving forwards – the future *MGS Rising* perhaps needs to provide a narrative reboot as much as its mooted mechanical restyling.

In terms of presentation, the game delivers the crispest, most attractive 3D seen on Sony's console, retaining a clean style for the main game and transitioning into wonderfully drawn cutscenes. The audio is masterful, as comfortable with footsteps breaking silence as the frantic techno of an Alert phase, with aching orchestral scores that drift over the most tense moments showcasing a unique sense for mood.

Immature developers imitate, mature ones steal. Kojima Productions has looked at the wider handheld market and lifted the best bits, reworking its own formulae to fit perfectly. There's so much right with *Peace Walker*. It shines a cruel light on the paucity of ambition we've come to expect from PSP titles and holds its head high with a structure of great elegance, its depth only let down by a slight lack of set-piece flair.

So here we are again, but everything's changed. If the series has over-familiar characteristics, then this pick-and-mix structure is a hard-won foil, and it should tempt nonbelievers in a way *MGS4* never could. Peerlessly classy, funny and perverse in the same breath, *Peace Walker* is the most surprising *Metal Gear Solid* to date. **[9]**

Snake hunt



Kojima Productions presumably came to the conclusion that, if it was going to take so much from *Monster Hunter*, it might as well just include it as a bonus. So you can hunt down wyverns in co-op, trading in your gunlance for claymores and Kalashnikovs. Another bonus is the back-catalogue-referencing Pooyan mode, in which you shoot balloons and send soldiers (not pigs) plummeting. And after an hour or two of fruitless (and accidental) groping we finally worked out what to do with Snake on a date. (Yes, you read that right.) There's an admirable strain of irreverence running through *Peace Walker*'s 'extra ops', and it's where the surreal edge of the series is let loose.



BLUR

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PS3 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION DEVELOPER: BIZARRE CREATIONS
PREVIOUSLY IN: E202, E214



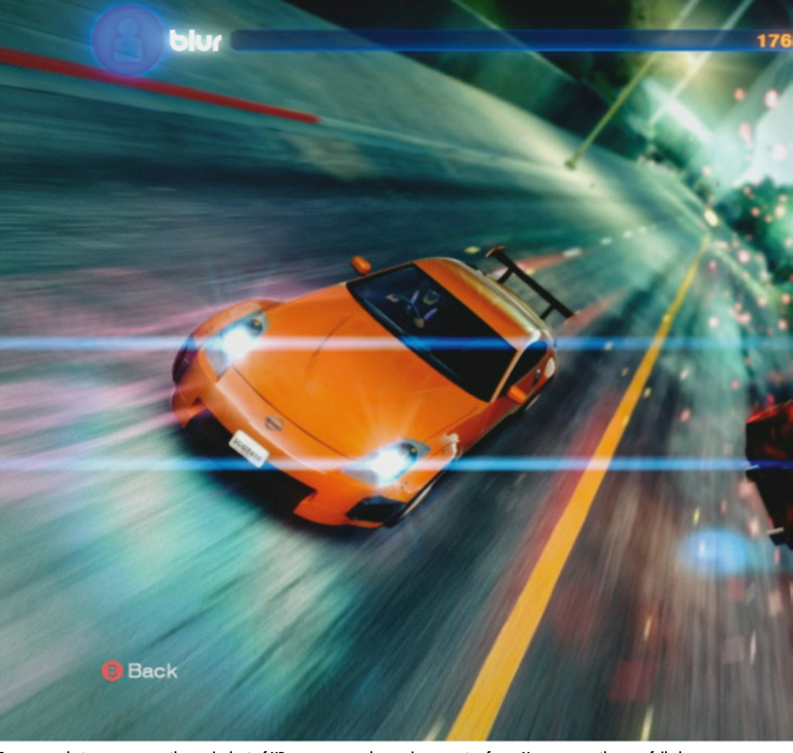


Power-ups are displayed as if hovering behind your car (top). It's a nice effect, but it's obscured when you're drifting

You'd never have thought that Brighton could be so thrilling. Bumping along its beach and aquaplaning through vast puddles towards a fireworks display in the distance, barely in control, careening into a smudged neon throng of catapulting metal and whining engines – this isn't any kind of seaside jaunt you've ever experienced before. Not outside of a particularly busy trip, anyway.

Bizarre Creations was once celebrated for its painstakingly rendered, near-photorealistic recreations of cities, but *Blur* will change all that. The real places are here, but they're twisted and remixed; muted and with lower detail. Viewed in isolation, *Blur*'s tracks, set at night, sunrise and sunset, are surprisingly drab – LA is grey concrete and impassive glass facades; Barcelona looks tired and empty; Hackney is grimly lit in sodium orange. In expressionistic terms they're pretty faithful, but might seem a curious stylistic choice for a balls-to-the-wall racer.

They're subdued so that the racing itself can provide the colour, of course. Unencumbered by the need to live up to the legacy of *Metropolis Street Racer*, *Blur* is reality through the lens of *Geometry Wars*. Broad flares of colour emit from every light source; cars are sent flying in blooming explosions of sparks. But *Blur* remains true to Bizarre's past: at its beating heart is score attack, which is race performance measured in Fans – or Kudos by any other name.



Fans accrue between races as the equivalent of XP – progress and you win new sets of cars. You can earn them on failed events, but only if you quit instead of restarting; your impulse to earn conflicts with the slow horror of the loading screen

Blur doesn't quite demand the same attention to driving skill as the *PGR* series. Instead, most Fans are earned through using power-ups for destruction. On first impression, handling feels arcade-loose, as if a last-minute drift can right any wrong, but most cars' firm understeer at speed quickly underlines the need to observe racing lines and proper braking. The complex topography of most courses, meanwhile, favours a light touch. In this regard, *Blur* is *Mario Kart*. That's a boon – it can't be dismissed as the karting game a Top Gear fan's allowed to like – but it also introduces a tension that will probably prove divisive: *Blur* is neither as accessible as *Mario Kart* nor complex enough to entirely appease simulation junkies.

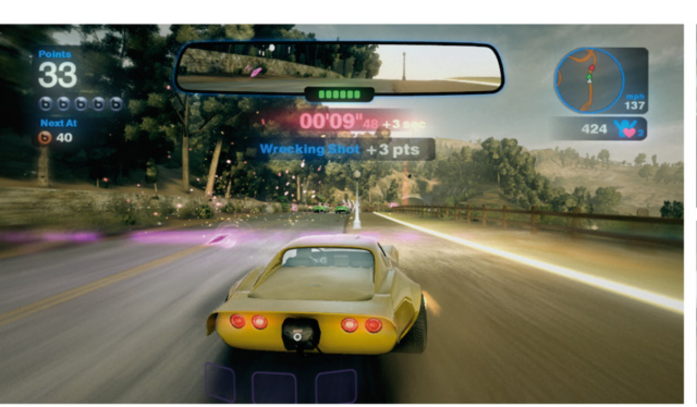
For the rest of us, *Blur*'s roster of vehicles, spread through four speed classes, boasts clear variety in handling and tactics, with vital statistics measured across speed,



Unencumbered by the need to live up to the legacy of Metropolis Street Racer, Blur is reality through the lens of Geometry Wars

acceleration, grip and 'health'. Drift-happy BMW M3s contrast with snappy Sciroccos, while heavy Range Rovers jostle through all. As in *MotorStorm*, the tracks attempt to accommodate the strengths of each, with some courses comprising many paths and track types, demanding that roadsters try to stick within precariously thin strips of tarmac and slalom around puddles while the otherwise slower 4x4s thunder through. Yet, in practice, on most tracks the heavy, slow rides tend to have a hard time keeping pace with faster models, consigning them to be likely ignored by all but the most committed.

Mediating such fundamentals are the power-ups, which on the surface may seem simplistic. There's shunt, the homing missile, the bullying barge, the quick-shot bolt, mines, shields, repairs and shock (*Blur*'s







Destruction mode sees you firing bolts to hit cars to win points and time extensions before the timer counts down. Green Ford Focuses go down in a single shot, while pickups take two and 4x4s three, but each leaves a present as it blows out of action, from shooting a bolt back at you to leaving a mine, so care and precision are vital





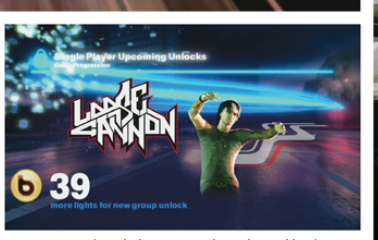








Race introductions feature some striking cutout effects, your car thrusting through framed views of the tracks, a countdown to the action suspended around them



Every time you launch the game you're welcomed by the encouraging pat on the back that is 'Previously on…', a sequence that recounts your most recent achievements, as well as those that are hiding just around the corner



Yellow Fan Demand icons, which remain persistent on the track until beaten, give you the power-up you need to complete them. Driving through them is a welcome source of ordnance that you'll lose access to once you've successfully finished the challenge

equivalent of the blue shell). But for what they lack in imagination they make up for in flexibility. Mines, shunts and nolts can be shot both forwards and back and, along with barges, can deflect enemy attacks. Nitro, meanwhile, is handy for resetting direction during a tight turn. Since you can store three power-ups and select between them, they offer a wide set of strategies; their distribution around the tracks ascribes certain routes if you know how best to exploit them.

The combination of light show, fizzing sound effects and aggressive AI is exhilarating – the rush of nitro-ing down a long bumpy straight towards the leaders and clumps of towering shocks laid down by the back of the pack is hard to beat. And if that wasn't enough, in career mode you'll also be attempting Fan Runs (challenges kicked off by driving through track icons) in which you must pass through ten gates, and Fan Demands, shortform challenges to, for instance, score two long-range bolt hits or barge a competitor while drifting. Races are breathless, tight and constantly shifting – you get little sense of rubber-banding and skill comes before luck. The measure of *Blur*'s success as a racer lies in the fact that you'll rarely find yourself restarting after fluffing the first lap of an event. Even races you know you have little chance of winning are enjoyable, which is some achievement.

It's a pity, then, that for all these riches, as a complete package *Blur* feels slight. It's significantly trimmed back from what we originally saw in **E**202, which was to have an ambitious career mode driven by a story told through a mock social network. Now, it's little more than a sequence of events in which you must earn Lights, earned by placing third to first in races, having a certain amount of time left on the clock for checkpoint races, or reaching set scores in destruction events, as well as winning Fan Runs and scoring set numbers of Fans.

It's mechanical stuff, but it's enlivened by Bizarre's knack for setting good Achievements and Trophies. *Blur* is deeply infused with meta-challenges, not only official Gamerpoint-scoring ones but also demands set by the characters who provide the faces for each tier of events in career mode, from drifting 1,500m over the course of Talon's events to barging a competitor into the water for Drayke. Completing all a character's demands unlocks a race with them – win that and you get their car.

As such, for those willing to test themselves, *Blur* offers much to do. And that's without considering its fulsome multiplayer options. But the awards and Fans you accrue through the game fail to allay a pervading sense of anonymity. You never really feel you own your experience other than through ticking off a checklist of demands. Ultimately, *Blur* provides too little in the way of engaging structure behind its exemplary racing to make it more than a series of thrilling rides. **[8]**

Pack racing



It's seems a shame to have to consign *Blur*'s multiplayer to a sidebar, but having not been able to play online beyond what we experienced during its beta (see E214) and see what the community makes of its game editing tools and friend challenge infrastructure, we're not yet in a position to assess it. Certainly, though, multiplayer will provide most of the game's long-term appeal. Splitscreen multiplayer for up to four players is excellent, providing uproariously tight tit-for-tat races as long as the players are reasonably evenly matched – *Blur* throws few lifelines to the less talented. Custom game options lend much flexibility, from setting bolt-only events to completely power-up-less ones. Motor Mash, meanwhile, is essentially *Mario Kart*'s Battle Mode and absolutely favours the grip-focused cars, but they'll always lack the turn-on-a-pin bounce of a kart.





The Prince is once again voiced by Yuri Lowenthal, his *Sands Of Time* and *Two Thrones* actor, though without a Farah around to spark off, his sarcastic quips and grumbled asides can feel rather forced



Don't worry, there's plenty more where that came from. Considering the number of monsters the game throws at you, a few more enemy styles wouldn't have gone amiss – the same two boss types appear throughout the game

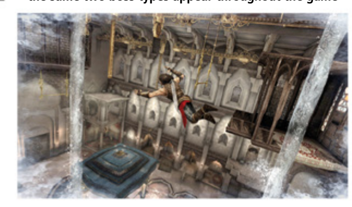
PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE FORGOTTEN SANDS

FORMAT: **360 (VERSION TESTED), PC, PS3**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW** PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** PREVIOUSLY IN: **E214**

Fluidity and grace: the two central tenets of the *Prince Of Persia* franchise are the chief attributes of its star, and therefore the two ways the series seeks to empower the player. Ubisoft's 2008 reboot was so keen not to break the flow of its prince's elegant acrobatics that it entirely removed death as a penalty for failure, and pared down its controls to the point where QTE levels of inputs were required for spectacular, dynamic results. In *The Forgotten Sands*, death is back with a vengeance, bringing an assortment of spiked pits, collapsing bridges and whirring saw blades along with it. Fortunately, *The Sands Of Time*'s time-reversal mechanic has also made a return, restoring the previous games' balance between frustration and leniency.

Play through *The Forgotten Sands*' opening levels, however, and you'll be forgiven for believing that the design was drawing its inspiration from 2008 rather than 2003. That sense of prescriptivism in the platforming returns: whereas *The Sands Of Time* would regularly place players at the base of complex, multi-tiered structures with only split-second visual cues by which to plan their ascent, *The Forgotten Sands* takes players more firmly by the hand. If the next ledge, switch or platform isn't immediately in front of you, you can rely on the camera to illustrate your route. Such is the desire to preserve the Prince's momentum that it's been rendered literally impossible to fall from narrow crossbeams the player would once have had to delicately pick their way across.

The focus, then, has shifted away from figuring out the route you'll thread from floor to ceiling, and on to the practicalities of actually doing so. Alongside the Prince's ability to reverse time are new magical skills, which include the centrepiece ability to freeze water sources at will. The game struggles, however, to integrate this power in a consistently engaging manner. Some sections, for instance, require players to rapidly freeze and unfreeze water in order to pass through or land on surfaces as needed, but much of the time the device feels uninspired, as if the walls, columns and poles the player would normally fling themselves from have merely been replaced with walls, columns and poles and the requirement that an extra button be held down.

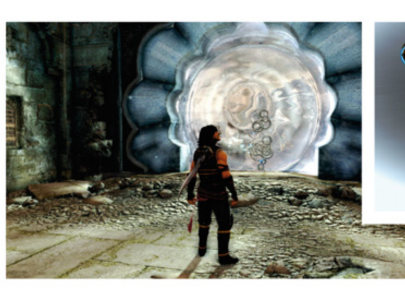


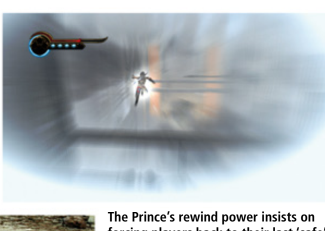
Streamlined controls mean that, rather than shimmying around columns before jumping, players can simply point in a direction, jump, and the Prince will twist and leap

Once a selection of other powers are introduced, such as a dash attack which allows the player to smash into enemies on platforms which would otherwise be out of reach, sections of the game emerge which require combinations of all the Prince's new abilities. These later areas offer more involved and satisfying platforming than the game's first half, but do so at the expense of the Prince's purely acrobatic moveset.

The Forgotten Sands continues the series' longstanding struggle with combat mechanics. In contrast to the one-on-one duels of the 2008 *POP*, *The Forgotten Sands* throws dozens of enemies at the player at once. Most of these battles, however, will be ended by spamming the most powerful magic attacks in the Prince's repertoire, and if they aren't, the player will have to gracelessly hack their way through the stragglers.

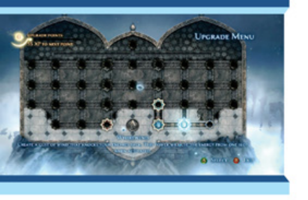
In many ways, *The Forgotten Sands* is the sequel *The Sands Of Time* never had. The first game which shouldered the responsibility of following it up differentiated itself through wholesale abandonment of its aesthetics – perhaps because, as *The Forgotten Sands* proves, there was nothing else to do but layer complexity on already peerless mechanics. **[6]**





The Prince's rewind power insists on forcing players back to their last 'safe' position. This can be irritating when fine-tuning a slightly misjudged leap

Climate change



One virtue of the masses of sword fodder the game throws at you is the relative swiftness with which players can accrue the experience points necessary to unlock further powers. Various upgrades are available, though the whirlwind and ice powers are by far the most efficient ways of taking out as many soldiers in the sand army as possible without breaking a sweat. Upgrades are unlocked through a grid system, with individual nodes requiring adjacent points to be unlocked before they become available. The appeal of upgrading your attacks to increasingly destructive levels adds a certain satisfaction to progression which the combat itself fails to provide.





Even from ranges as close as this (left), training your reticule on an enemy doesn't guarantee heavy damage or even a hit. Weapons skill and experience determine accuracy and effectiveness as much as where you're aiming

ALPHA PROTOCOL

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3 (VERSION TESTED) **RELEASE:** OUT NOW **PUBLISHER:** SEGA
DEVELOPER: OBSIDIAN ENTERTAINMENT **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E190, E204

The hybrid genre genetics of *Alpha Protocol* – thirdperson shooter spliced with roleplaying game – create some awkward, logic-defying moments. Such as field agent hero Michael Thorton standing in full view of security cameras but failing to trigger the alarm, or emptying a clip of SMG rounds into enemy faces with disappointingly non-fatal results.

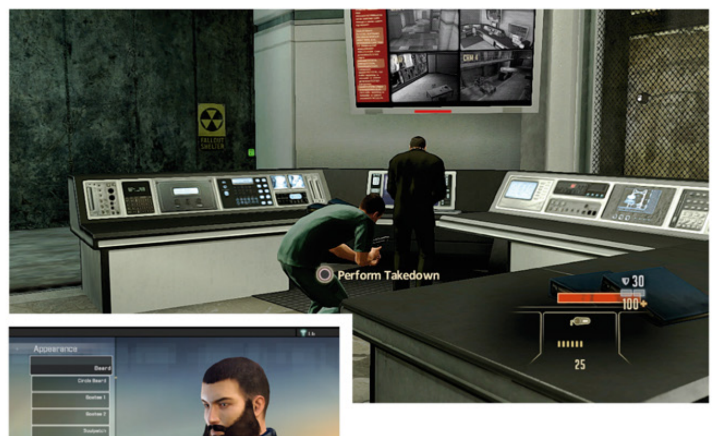
Like *Mass Effect* or Obsidian's own *Knights Of The Old Republic II*, *Alpha Protocol* is a disorienting mix of the literal and the roleplaying figurative. What you can see (a reticule resting on an enemy temple) is tempered by what you can't (an invisible rule sheet of stat trees and skill points). Thorton can't properly use a weapon until he's levelled up the appropriate skill. Build up your SMG stat but pack a shotgun and you might as well be firing foam rockets.

The resulting disconnection of player and character skill might not be a new problem, but it is one that *Mass Effect 2* seems to have solved to happy faces all round, and it's felt especially keenly here thanks to *Alpha Protocol*'s very grounded and immediate feel. The game works hard to look and handle like a regular twitch shooter – Thorton hits cover and blindfires like a Marcus Fenix or Nathan Drake, and borrows their buttons while he's at it. But with so much decided by the background numbers, the more complex the player interaction – cover, sprint, zoom, climb – the more it feels like a charade.

None of which would be a lasting problem if the long game of levelling and specialisation was strong enough to impose itself on the more obvious duck-and-cover mechanics. But it struggles. Level design is skewed towards short bursts of action in small, confined spaces, with Thorton warping from his various safe houses directly to his chosen mission. These mission areas may feature multiple routes for tactical variation – up ladders, through breachable locked doors – but the stealthy option is by far the more challenging, and will likely result in most players boosting weapons and armour to the point at which their character more or less matches the blunt-instrument abilities the control scheme suggests he should have. Which is fine, but effectively neuters a system full of detailed, if unbalanced, complexity.

With shooting that feels unresponsive and character building that's hardly engaging, what could save *Alpha Protocol* is excellent presentation and a gripping story. It falters on both counts. Visually it's limited, despite the extended development time, with drab environments and sock-puppet character modelling (Thorton, arms folded, looks like a creased pillow). Without the sweep of an epic fantasy narrative, the familiar branching conversations (now about weapons caches and data uploads) quickly grate. The cast are genre fodder, from Darcy the preening CIA instructor to Sie the ex-Stasi Amazon, and make-believing in this cynical and rather empty world of paranoia doesn't compare to patrolling the galaxy or defeating a dark overlord.

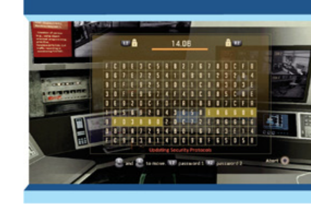
Alpha Protocol isn't great, then. The game is its own worst enemy, as its fully featured hands-on action never quite sits comfortably with roleplaying combat. The more concrete the actions you perform, the more intrusive the influence of stats and skills seems, and the less coherent the world feels. Though if espionage is a murky and grey undertaking, *Alpha Protocol* at least gets that element right. **[5]**



One way to mitigate weapon inaccuracy is to get in close for a takedown (left). This can be a simple sneak and neck snap, or rushing a downed enemy for an always-lethal stomp

One of the more engaging aspects of the game is gauging the personality of different characters and choosing responses designed to endear you to them

The gadget show



***Alpha Protocol*'s equipment falls into two categories – weapons and gadgets – both purchased from a sort of black ops eBay accessible from Thorton's safe house. Weapons come with a raft of stat-boosting accessories (sights, clips, special ammunition) that increase their destructive potential, while gadgets are generally designed for more stealthy use (EMP grenades or fake radio signals to cancel alarms). Less stealthy, though, is the mechanic for managing Thorton's equipment, a clunky selection wheel that force-pauses the game when used, breaking up the action.**



A hacking minigame recreates the well-loved 'trace the squiggly line' activity from children's puzzle books



JOE DANGER

FORMAT: PS3 **RELEASE:** JUNE **PUBLISHER:** HELLO GAMES
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E207



Danger!



***Joe Danger*'s level editor is gently introduced to players through levels that require the positions of ramps and platforms to be tweaked in order to gain access to stars that would otherwise be out of reach – a puzzle mechanic that feels underused. Outside of career mode, players can build levels from scratch and share them with their friends. It's a comprehensive and flexible tool, and for many will be the source of the game's long-term appeal, though much of its charm comes from devising levels designed to kill Joe in a variety of fiendish and hilarious ways.**

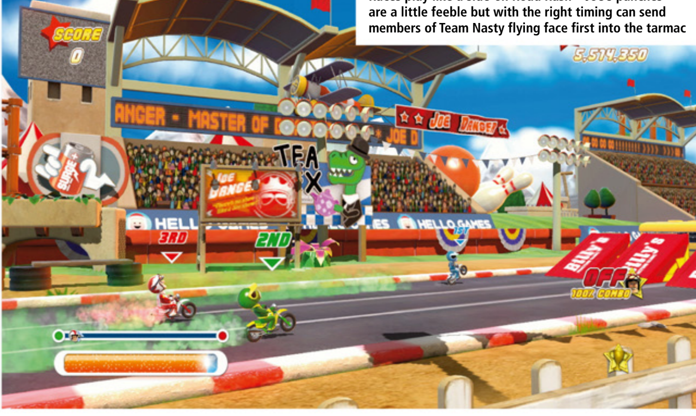
At times, *Joe Danger* can be infuriatingly moreish. By rights, you really should have thrown the controller through the window well before the moment that 'Attempt 67' is cheerfully splashed across the screen. But for every occasion that Joe's irresistible blend of hurtling speed and springy physics brings you back for attempts 68, 69, and all the attempts beyond, it'll leave you grinding your teeth in frustration at a disastrous landing you couldn't reasonably predict. At these times, *Joe Danger*'s just plain infuriating.

Hello Games' 'stunt 'em up', a genre patchwork which draws from racers and platformers to build a title owing more to *Sonic The Hedgehog* than any recent release, veers between being more and less than the sum of its parts. Don't let the bright, characterful graphics fool you: *Joe Danger*'s a demanding game, and Joe's a demanding protagonist. In the right hands he's a nimble, flexible little daredevil, but training your hands to that point requires mastery of controls which combine sophisticated aerial manoeuvres (when airborne, L2 and R2 adjust Joe's position, and with the right timing while travelling up a ramp a tap of square can send him flying sky-high) with a boost mechanic that, used properly, can send Joe hurtling just about anywhere. Stunts are pulled off using a combination of L1, R1 and the left stick, and are used to refill Joe's boost meter as well as for clocking up high scores. Bring anything less than a thorough understanding of the controls to a sizeable chunk of the game's challenges, however, and you'll be doomed to a series of restarts.

Difficulty isn't a problem, and the more awkward of Joe's challenges rarely become sticking points for your overall progress throughout the game. Levels are grouped into 'Tours' and subdivided into individual races, which in turn contain a selection of tasks each giving a star as a reward. But whereas the controls are a mostly successful fusion of racing and platform mechanics, its levels, on more than one occasion, aren't.

Joe Danger's is at its best in the shorter, sweeter courses – a race against Joe's stuntman rivals, Team Nasty, for instance, or a challenge that offers what at first seems an impossible arrangement of target pads, spinning platforms and pinball-style bumpers. The longer courses, which sprinkle a host of challenges across their moderate length and require more than one visit to complete, can feel chaotic and unfocused, and also tend to expose the limitations of *Joe Danger*'s camera – failure feels unfair when a jump lands you in a pit of sharks you simply couldn't see from up high. Maintaining a stunt combo across the duration of these courses (a common requirement for some stars) often requires comprehensive knowledge of the track layout as opposed to reckless stuntman skills.

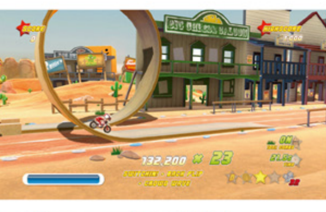
The game's frustrations are notable, but never spoil the appeal of controlling that indefatigable little guy. Every time Joe lands in a giant mousetrap, blows himself up or pulls himself out of a shark pit only to hop right back on his bike, it's hard not to feel like you owe him another 67 tries. **[7]**



Races play like a side-on *Road Rash* – Joe's punches are a little feeble but with the right timing can send members of Team Nasty flying face first into the tarmac



Wheelies and endos are essential methods for stringing stunt combos together to get high scores. They also allow you to refill Joe's boost bar while you're stationary – handy when trying to line up a jump









MODNATION RACERS

FORMAT: PS3 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW **PUBLISHER:** SCE
DEVELOPER: UNITED FRONT GAMES **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E207

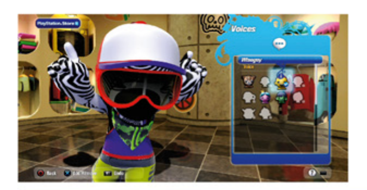
When *ModNation Racers* screeched on to the stage at last year's E3, anyone could have guessed the elevator pitch. "It's *LittleBigPlanet*," Jack Tretton didn't scream, but should have, "with cars!" Media Molecule's crafty platformer established deep foundations for PS3's Play, Create, Share brand – a familiar campaign mode at the front, backing on to a build-your-own garage of customisation and distribution. *ModNation* slipstreams this template neatly, refining the creation tools to suit fast tarmac-laying, featuring essentially the same functionality as *LBP* – with cars.

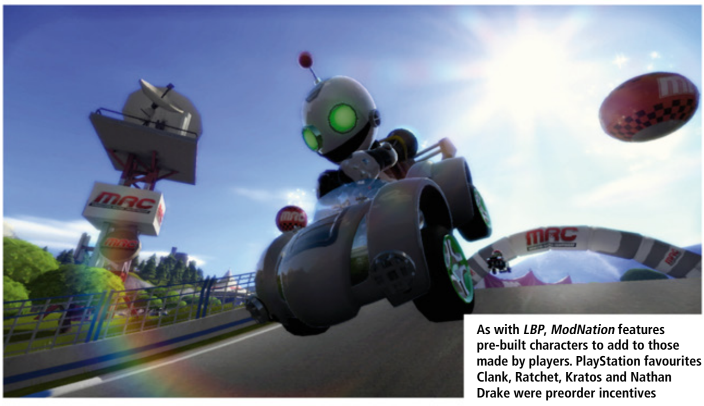
With a structure that good, you'd think the only thing that could scupper *ModNation* would be if the racing wasn't up to scratch. It is – just about. The elephant powersliding around the track is *Mario Kart*, and *ModNation* borrows liberally from Nintendo's definitive series: power-ups in batches lined up across the track, drifting around wide corners and, hopefully, chaos. There are a few changes: power-ups can be upgraded by subsequent grabs of the same weapon, for example, turning straightforward rockets into a swarm of heatseekers. And drifting charges an energy bar, which can be used for a short boost of speed, a temporary energy shield, or a sideswipe to disrupt rival racers. They're not major additions – basic weapons and a good racing line still dominate play – but add a welcome sprinkle of tactics to a setup that's becoming overfamiliar.

One thing *Mario Kart* veterans will notice is the heavier-than-expected handling. On the straights it's fine, but transitioning out of drifts is cumbersome and slows races down. It's the major fault that distinguishes *ModNation* from its inspiration, and as potentially divisive as Sackboy's floaty jumping. A shame, because elsewhere United Front has clearly learned from Media Molecule's game. *ModNation*'s creation mode outdoes its predecessor in ease of access and user-friendliness without any obvious loss of complexity – dedicated doodlers can (and will) lose weeks in here, but it's now downright easy for the more impatient and questionably talented of us to create raceable tracks too.

A mixture of detailed tools and autopilot crutches is the key. Get past the bedrock of character and car creation (clothes, eyes, stickers, accessories) and the core stuff is in track design. To lay an initial track, you simply steamroller through an open environment, turning, raising and lowering the track (with fat, friendly 'autocomplete' and 'undo' buttons always awaiting a prod). Sculpting geography is the same – detailed imprint tools can be resized, tilted and tweaked for almost infinite accuracy and variation. Or players can fly about their sandbox like a vengeful *Populous* god, going Old Testament at random until it's unrecognisable. It's a creation tool that's ultimately accessible to anyone, full of thoughtful shortcuts that suit its subject. Flaming hoops and switch-activated shortcuts might be nice to have, for example, but a final decorative layer of trackside trees and houses can also be auto-created just to get the track up and running.

The result is a triumphant toolset attached to a decent stab at the karting genre. Although *LBP* has the edge in terms of visual charm and broke the ground for this expansive genre, in its details *ModNation* is not an unworthy successor. Should Play, Create, Share continue expanding, *ModNation*'s take on it may well be its broadest achievement. It sacrifices a little complexity and depth, but the result is a less intimidating toolset, one that far more people will find easy to use, and far less liable to result in a cluttered hard drive of half-finished masterpieces. **[8]**





As with *LBP*, *ModNation* features pre-built characters to add to those made by players. PlayStation favourites Clank, Ratchet, Kratos and Nathan Drake were preorder incentives

The shield offers one advantage *Mario Kart* never had: the ability to block any weapon, so long as you've preserved your energy bar. It makes leading from the front a more strategic and less frustrating experience, although the gap between missile alarm and strike is often suspiciously short

The built-in tracks fail to provide any truly excellent courses. This should be addressed soon, and you can expect servers to be full of *Mario Kart* replicas

Rubber banding



One thing *ModNation* has borrowed from *Mario Kart* which racers will probably wish it hadn't is gratuitous AI rubber banding – the ability of computer-controlled racers to keep up with player karts no matter how fast and efficiently they drive. But at least Mario was subtle (well, to an extent, with rivals having an amazing capacity to stick to the racing line) or totally upfront about it (those controversial, unavoidable blue shells). *ModNation* clatters through this most delicate of karting protocols with barrages of heat-seeking missiles bombarding players as they approach the finish of tougher races, often, it seems, without the usual warning noise which gives them a chance to raise their shields.



CHAOS RINGS

FORMAT: IPHONE, IPOD TOUCH **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SQUARE ENIX **DEVELOPER:** MEDIA VISION

The story of Escher and Musiea (around eight hours on first playthrough) is one of the game's most intense and moving, providing enough intrigue to keep you guessing

The art design is detailed and eccentric without being abstract or cluttered, and an option to turn off environmental effects relieves strained eyes. The rousing overture for battles and the subtle, melodramatic tones of the dialogue will be familiar to players versed in Square Enix's brand of drama

Gene genie



There's a good variety of enemies to take on, each with their own element, or 'gene', dictating their strengths and weaknesses. Analysis takes one turn and is essential for getting the upper hand in some of the more testing encounters. The level of detail in battles is astonishing, with some of the screen-filling foes flaunting top-notch animations. Crucially, the pace at which you'll find yourself scrolling through the menus with the jab of a finger, delivering knockout blows or desperately conjuring antidote serums, will make you reluctant to go back to a standard joypad. It's a level of immediacy that Apple's iPad can only improve on with its increased screen size.

With its vaguely medieval character types, turn-based battling and level-based progression ladder, *Chaos Rings* looks every inch the traditional Square Enix property. But look a little closer and it's something more radical – a big publisher investment that tests the viability of an old genre on a new platform.

The story, delivered in short, sweet text interludes and miniature cutscenes, tracks a group of strangers paired up and thrown into a grinding RPG before being forced to take one another on for the reward of immortality. It's Battle Royale, Square Enix style, and it's the perfect vehicle to drip-feed characterisation and the studio's levelling structure. It's all punctuated by a surprisingly sombre tale that meditates on themes of death and forgiveness in its gladiatorial setting in a way unexpected, but certainly welcome, in such a short, sharp burst of portable gaming. The downside is that because the narrative acts more like a crutch for the repetitive play, it offers little of the escapism and respite those investing longer periods of time may yearn for. But that's the point: this is a bite-sized RPG that doesn't intend to bloat you with empty calories.

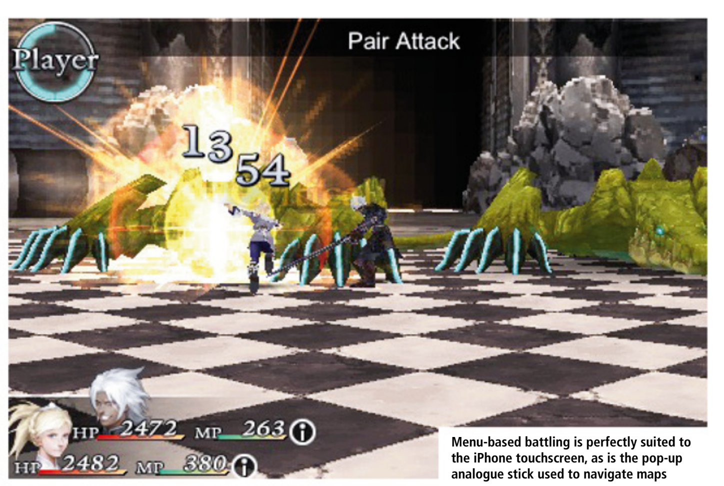
In action it doesn't have the brevity or smash-and-grab frivolity of a *Half-Minute Hero*, though. Your time in *Chaos Rings* is divided between scavenging the map for keys and raising your level in order to triumph over the next boss. The save-anywhere system is a concession to both the hardware and the theoretically broad audience it serves, and one that eases the harsh difficulty often associated with the genre. You can even select the difficulty for each world before you set off, tiered by brackets of levels in a way that ensures a flexible learning curve.

There's even a small-scale economy, allowing for items and resources to be bought and sold – though purchasing new weapons after each milestone feels more like routine than multiple choice. Items and plenty of other trimmings, from emergency exits to life-giving chocolate bars (white chocolate being the healthiest, strangely), are both rewards for victory and reasons to go rummaging around the four main worlds. The maps are distinctive enough to be a challenge without devolving into confusion, offering multiple routes and detours. Puzzle rooms – basic, fun variations on trial-and-error switch-pushing – break up the pace and unlock new areas of the maps.

In the wake of *FFXIII*'s protracted indulgences, the accessibility of the iPhone hardware is a gift rather than a curse. Free of the cinematic ties that sometimes bind epic RPGs to lengthy runtimes and laboured progress, as well as being an entry point for casual players into an often intimidating world of swords and stats, *Chaos Rings* is also a rewarding stopgap for anyone after something old on something new. **[8]**







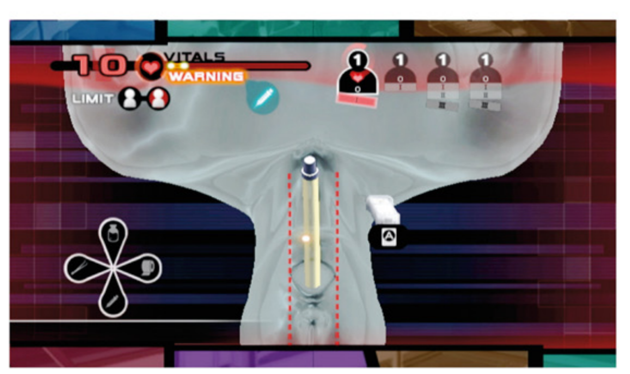
Menu-based battling is perfectly suited to the iPhone touchscreen, as is the pop-up analogue stick used to navigate maps





TRAUMA TEAM

FORMAT: WII **RELEASE:** OUT NOW (JAPAN, US), TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: ATLUS **DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE

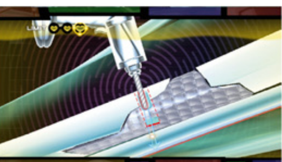


After three sequels opting for holistic tinkering over invasive reworking, *Trauma Center* finally grows up and leaves residency in *Trauma Team*. Traditional surgery is but one of six distinct disciplines, others repurposing old favourites – *Second Opinion*'s bone jigsaws expand into standalone orthopaedics – or snaking into regions unknown. Quite literally, in the case of endoscopy. That forensic pathology and symptom diagnosis exist as competent (and surprisingly substantial) point-and-click puzzlers is testament to *Team*'s adventurous vision.

Not all work. Hammering pins into femurs with the Remote gives orthopaedics a grisly first impression betrayed by repetitive steady-hand tests. Similarly, surreal banter between doctor and robot sidekick fails to disguise the diagnostician's symptoms of being basic spot the difference. Their colleagues fare better. Forensics echoes Miles Edgeworth's recent DS outing in its logical deduction thrust, but packs more puzzling into one-hour cases than Capcom managed in 20. And endoscopy, with its strange journeys through neon guts, provides a haptic thrill as the camera is teased through fluctuating sphincters with slow Remote pushes.

Surgery repeats old routines but smooths their edges. Time limits are gone and bright icons show which tool to use. Purists initially upset by the dumbing down of *Center*'s trademark arcade-like urgency will find the new focus on precise perfection a decent substitute, accurate procedures (still graded with a comically inappropriate 'cool'), move-chaining and a system of Achievement-like criteria ensuring replay value. And any dozing fingers are in for a rude awakening come the paramedic sections – juggling multiple patients bleeding from multiple holes provides a frantic strategic twist on returning surgical procedures.

In Japan, *Trauma Team* is called *Hospital* – a far more pertinent name. What are branching disciplines for if not for us to wander the corridors, poking in our Remotes as probes, drills, slices, swabs and endotracheal intubations? Taken alone, the six campaigns are successes and failures. Stitched together, this is a rich tapestry of interaction with few rivals. Atlus's surgery sim is in rude health. **[8]**



Flicking between multiple patients as the first response medic sees *Trauma Center* meet *Diner Dash*. Stabilise, suture and don't forget the fries



The six professions can be tackled as linear campaigns or flitted between in chronological order to reveal how each affects the other. You'll have to pardon some ripe voice-acting, mind



BIT.TRIP RUNNER

FORMAT: WII **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: AKSYS GAMES **DEVELOPER:** GAIJIN GAMES

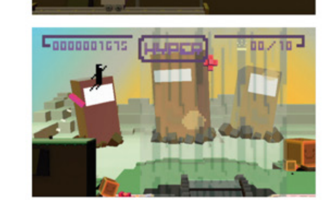


Following the simple pixel stars of *Bit.Trip Beat*, *Core* and *Void*, Gaijin Games promotes its oblong mascot, Commander Video, to the starring role in what looks like a major departure for the rhythm-based series. When he launches into an automatic sprint, though, we are shown otherwise. Our part in this involuntary speedrun is to protect the Commander with jumps, slides, kicks and bounds. In practice, *Runner* plays like *Vib Ribbon* with the madness removed. Pits, ledges, rocks and fences put us squarely in platformer territory (8bit-styled bonus levels even pay homage to *Pitfall*).

Runner is torn between two genres. On one hand, a neat chiptune soundtrack builds through successful manoeuvres, a note for every action. Play well and the world sounds better – the aural foundation of all great rhythm games. On the other hand, Gaijin panders to the platforming convention of character death. Collide with any object, and Video is whisked back to the beginning. The two ideas simply refuse to gel; music isn't the reward but a by-product of following the single route that doesn't end in death. This is a platformer to be solved, not played.

Deaths are fast and many, leading to tiresome rote learning. For every adrenaline rush from navigating virgin territory there are screamingly dull stretches that have to be replayed again and again. Why force us to replay 90 per cent of a level we've repeatedly beaten? Checkpoints would have been welcome. It doesn't help that Video's abilities are muddled by a huge catalogue of obstacles. UFOs, fences, rocks, crystals, pixels (different colours requiring different responses), fireballs – it can all scrunch up into confusion, and it's often too much to make out against hectic backgrounds.

More memory game than arcadey reaction test, *Runner* lets character and convention muddy the stark mechanics that made *Bit.Trip*'s WiiWare name. Commander Video needs to be the bigger rectangle and step aside for the two final planned instalments. **[5]**



What with the prescribed route through each stage, boss encounters are rather surreal. Fail to hit the massive weak spot in the given attack window and Video will die instantly



To truly complete a level you need to collect every gold bar in one run – they dot the optimal route – and grab every bar in the following *Pitfall*-inspired jaunt. No small task

IVY THE KIWI

FORMAT: WII, DS (VERSION TESTED)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), SUMMER (US), TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: NAMCO BANDAI DEVELOPER: PROPE



The Wii version matches the DS game, but with pointer controls. Sweeping across the screen is smooth but we prefer the accuracy of the stylus

After the 'controller free' sensation that was *Let's Tap*, Prope continues its investigation (under Yuji Naka's watchful eye) into novel control experiences. We go hands-on in *Ivy The Kiwi*, but not with the bird herself. Rather she is guided through mazes along vines drawn on to the screen. A similar idea was seen in the excellent *Kirby's Power Paintbrush*, and this handles with the same tight, responsive stylus control. Tug on a drawn vine and it acts as a bowstring, vital for launching Ivy through blockages and enemies alike on her quest to return to her mother.

Difficulty builds nicely as vines transform from basic paths into protective barriers. Trying to guide Ivy above spikes while catching tumbling debris from above requires frantic reactions. Survival is but one aim, however, as the levels aren't truly completed until feathers are snatched from their deadly corners. Snatching at speed is even better, and by dragging vines Ivy can be hooked up and catapulted forwards. Performed gracefully, it has the feel of a trapeze artist, while YouTube reveals speedrunners performing minor miracles beyond our clumsy thumbs

Alas, Prope fails to capitalise on this: time trials encourage faster play but there are no online leaderboards. Mechanically satisfying, it is a general lack of glitz that ultimately grounds Ivy; the brown storybook art style sees one level blend into the next, a repetitive stream of swooping vines and angular passages. The package feels particularly slim, too, betraying its roots as a Windows Mobile timewaster. That both the Wii and DS versions have abridged Ware equivalents (lacking the not-particularly-engaging fourplayer race mode) comes as no surprise.

Currently being tweaked (with a new art style) for western release, we only hope that the changes will see a solid idea take flight. **[6]**



Annoyingly, vines don't disappear until three more are drawn. Making a mistake is a messy business as the vines drawn to destroy old vines become new vines needing destroying. And so on



DODOGO

FORMAT: DSI RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: NEKO ENTERTAINMENT
DEVELOPER: ALIEN AFTER ALL



Some of the details are inspired – move a grouchy egg next to a happy one, and while the former grumbles the latter will whisper a funny secret in its ear. They'll both laugh, and voila: two happy eggs

Sometimes, you take a step back and realise you're tickling eggs to make a living. Still, it beats laying them, and *DodoGo*'s cute visuals and little tricks overlay a puzzler of real substance, one that's not quite as kindly as it first appears.

The first impressions aren't good, though: *DodoGo* has an absolutely turgid opening. The text speed is too slow, the instructions are ponderously multi-stage for even the simplest element, and only the visuals stop you from turning the whole thing off.

Persevere, though, and *DodoGo* unfolds into a rich and multi-layered series of step puzzles, in which you have to move multiple eggs towards the exit while keeping the entire layout in mind. The levels are full of one-shot constructions that will help a single egg cross a bridge or break its fall, but then disappear, meaning you have to keep future layouts in your head as you plan an overall strategy, storing up the swipes over the course of minutes before finally unleashing them all and watching your army bounce home – or crash and crack open on the ground.

Despite the clumsiness of those tutorial stages, *DodoGo* turns out to have a smooth difficulty curve rather than a spiky one, and an absolute wealth of stages to play through – far more than you might expect from a DSiWare release. There are clever touches, too, like Jokers which let you skip levels you're really stuck on, and letting you place parts on the stage (though it has to be said that where to put stuff is usually obvious).

DodoGo never quite hits the heights of its inspirations, but when you're talking about *Lemmings* that's no great criticism. What it does have is bundles of charm, a gorgeous art style, and enough bite-sized chunks to last many a journey. **[7]**



You have to zoom in on the eggs when they're grumpy or cracked, and then you can get down to stroking or applying bandages. Intimate stuff, though it gets tiresome after a while





ROCKET KNIGHT

FORMAT: 360, PS3 (VERSION TESTED)
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: KONAMI
DEVELOPER: CLIMAX PREVIOUSLY IN: E212

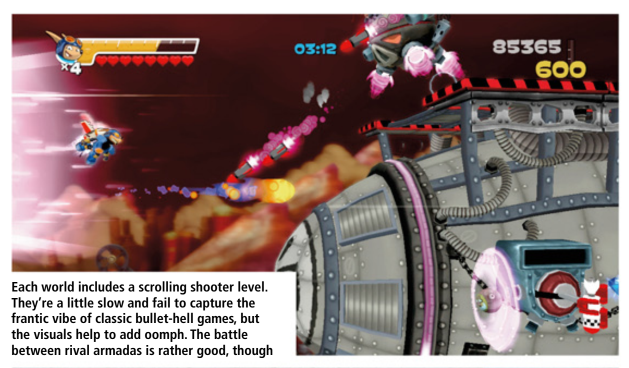
It's been 16 years since Sparkster last fired up his jetpack, but *Rocket Knight* is still firmly in 1994. Brit developer Climax has done a decent job of recapturing the feel of platformers of yore, but the game's only concession to present-day platforming is the chunky nature of its 3D visuals. It would hardly matter but it fails to hit the original's highs. Sparkster's first appearance was made up of levels built entirely around set-pieces, but the four worlds on offer here feel cluttered and contrived in comparison.

The levels are constructed to milk the most out of the plucky opossum's jetpack, and successfully so in many cases, with intricately created obstacle courses demanding quick thumb-work and fast thinking. But while it often strikes a happy medium, it's too often left to visual content to provide the drama. An otherwise-plodding shooter section is only enlivened by the background battle between two ramshackle air forces, for instance.

Standout moments are all too rare, and the game's few good ideas are often overused. The combat, meanwhile, struggles to match the precision of the platforming, particularly during boss encounters. Most of Sparkster's attacks don't have the range to be of much use against the majority of enemies; in some cases this again forces creative jetpack use, but in others it merely results in a tiresome trading of blows.

The game's major flaw, however, is its brevity. The levels are suitably large but there are only four worlds to explore, and the chance of making an impression on online leaderboards is scant reason to replay.

As comebacks go, then, *Rocket Knight* is ultimately a muted affair, the jet-propelled opossum apparently content to remain yesterday's hero rather than updating his act. **[5]**



Each world includes a scrolling shooter level. They're a little slow and fail to capture the frantic vibe of classic bullet-hell games, but the visuals help to add oomph. The battle between rival armadas is rather good, though

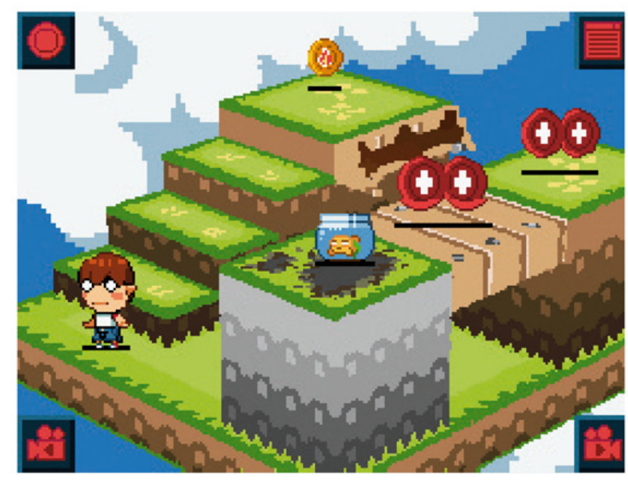


Using the jetpack provides the game with its best moments. Pressing the button a second time adds some spin, allowing Sparkster to smash through fragile scenery – a feature occasionally used to clever effect



FLIPPER

FORMAT: DSI RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: XFORM
DEVELOPER: GOODBYE GALAXY GAMES PREVIOUSLY IN: E212

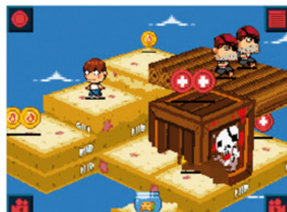


They never look like it, do they? *Flipper* is one of those games that makes you turn the air blue, and frequently. Its wide-eyed sprites and chunky voxel worlds suggest a pre-teen fairytale, but a stubborn attitude and limited ruleset often make it a grim one.

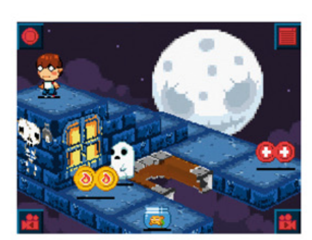
You control a little chap who's had his goldfish stolen, so in each level you guide him to it. Every location is a single screen, viewable from eight angles, in which you have to alternately build and destroy the landscape. There are three power-ups to help: a fireball that blasts away at the landscape, churning up the topography so you can clamber over or send enemies to their doom; a platform that lets you place clods of land; and finally a medical item that restores destroyed bits of the level.

The controls are very much prod-and-wait, as you patiently consider where best to move the boy and exactly which angle you need to get the desired effect from your item. There's an annoying looseness in the game's interpretation of your moves, however – you'll press the exact spot in which you want a platform, and it'll appear on the lower level in the background. Restart. Rather meanly, there's no method of swapping power-ups once you've picked them up (you'll often have to use three in exactly the right order). Restart.

But *Flipper*'s biggest problem is that, behind the annoyances, it's a cakewalk. There's nothing in here you'll puzzle over for long, only to be left open-mouthed at the elegance of the solution. It's a game you'll race through, and the extra stars to collect provide little reason to return. It's the cutest game we've seen in a while, but not nearly as good as it looks. **[4]**



This is typical of the later puzzles: destroy the box's corners and restore the ground around the fishbowl. The only real challenge is dodging the pirates and finding the hidden gold star



The enemies walk back and forth across set routes, though if you cross their line of sight they'll dash. They're just another obstacle, really, but with a frustrating capacity for resets


PC CD-ROM
STAR WARS
KNIGHTS

TIME EXTEND

KOTOR II: THE SITH LORDS

FORMAT: **PC, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **LUCASARTS**
DEVELOPER: **OBSIDIAN ENTERTAINMENT**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **2004**



How fate cut short Obsidian's attempt to rewrite the western RPG from within

The Sith Lords should have been The Empire Strikes Back of Star Wars games. The ingredients were there. Just as Episode V saw directing reins handed from George Lucas to Irvin Kreshner, *The Sith Lords* saw development duties pass from series creator BioWare into the hands of Obsidian Entertainment. And just as Kreshner's relatively complex and open-ended narrative took the Star Wars universe to places darker and thematically richer, the story of *The Sith Lords* offers players a tale packed with ambiguities and complexities that the original *KOTOR* didn't dare attempt. And just as The Empire Strikes Back is generally held to be the greatest of the Star Wars movies… well, that's where the comparison falls apart. Whereas The Empire Strikes Back became, for many, the yardstick by which Lucas's subsequent films were judged, what *The Sith Lords* measures best is its own thwarted ambition and the painful gulf between the game that was released and the one that might have been.

Obsidian's sequel was the product of an alleged 13-month gestation period better suited to a yearly sports update than a complete RPG. While asset reuse is common practice for sequels, players could be forgiven for being surprised to see two entire planets reappearing. Less forgivable, however, was the number of bugs in the game at release. You'll watch hopelessly as your Jedi remains rooted to the spot following battle. Or you'll grit your teeth as he or she wields (presumably via Force power) a melee weapon despite it somehow floating a good foot beyond their grasp. Or, if you're unlucky, you'll be forced to reload half an hour's play when a cutscene refuses to finish while the characters stand awkwardly, as if waiting for a stagehand to give them their lines.

But when everything works, the game's capacity to fulfill childhood Jedi fantasies is unparalleled. Like its predecessor, *The Sith Lords* is built around Wizards Of The Coast's d20 RPG mechanics, which means the clashing Lightsabers and crisscrossing blaster fire are merely flashy CGI obscuring the stat-tweaking strategy beneath the surface. Rather than causing a disconnection between the player's inputs and their eventual effect, the system makes battles look suitably spectacular, while the player concentrates on managing their entire team's repertoire of powers.

What The Sith Lords measures best is its thwarted ambition and the gulf between the game that was released and the one that might have been

Unlike the first game, players are given access to those Jedi powers from the start, and some welcome balance issues mean that by the end of the game, your character will have ascended to something approaching a demigod, capable of blasting whole platoons of Sith troopers across the room with a wave of their hand.

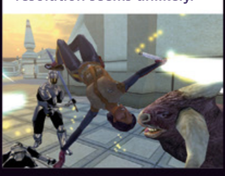
This combat system is embedded in a wider roleplaying experience, and one that places the player character at the heart of the game. *The Sith Lords* recycles the first game's planet-hopping structure, but where *KOTOR* had the player searching for a series of inanimate plot devices, *The Sith Lords*' exiled Jedi has the player tracking down the Jedi Masters who exiled him, meaning the culmination of each planet is an opportunity not only to discover more about the (canonically female) Exile's past, but to colour and shape her present perception of it through your choices and dialogue responses.

Such a structure wouldn't work



A LONG TIME AGO

Mass Effect 2 players who'd had the misfortune to copy over their *ME1* save may be irritated to know that *The Sith Lords* enables players to outline decisions made in the original *KOTOR*. A chat with a party member reveals they'd missed key chunks of galactic history – such as whether the player from the first game saved the galaxy, or all but destroyed it – which players are obliged to provide. Obsidian allowed for all outcomes by making that character's disappearance into space one of *The Sith Lords*' mysteries, and one of the threads left dangling at the game's end. With *The Old Republic* taking place 300 years after *KOTOR*, a resolution seems unlikely.





were it not for one of *The Sith Lords*' greatest strengths, which is a rare one for a videogame – its writing. *Knights Of The Old Republic*'s script couldn't be faulted for capturing the essence of Star Wars characterisation and 'I've got a bad feeling about this…' dialogue, but *The Sith Lords*' greatest achievement is managing to do the same while also exploring themes of greater psychological and moral complexity. At points where most games would place an action set-piece or boss fight, *The Sith Lords* serves up a sprawling dialogue tree exploring one of the game's pet themes – such as the difference between losing one's beliefs and sacrificing them, or the player character's relationship with her past. In truth, this can be detrimental to the game's pacing, but it's rare for even an RPG to place so much faith in the various themes underpinning its script, which are expressed in gameplay terms through the choices offered to the player.

Like the original *KOTOR*, *The Sith Lords* gives players the opportunity to move either way along a sliding scale between pure innocence and absolute evil (with the player's ultimate dark or light side alliance affecting the Force powers at their disposal), yet the dilemmas offered by Obsidian's game seem to curiously under-support such a clear-cut dichotomy. On Telos, players are asked to choose between two factions involved in a restoration effort on the planet's war-ravaged surface. On the one side are the Ithorians – environmentalist aliens seeking to restore the planet to its natural beauty, slowly and expensively. On the other side is the more profit-minded Czerka cooperation, which is attempting to make the restoration effort as fiscally self-sufficient as possible, even at the expense of the local ecology. While the game ultimately casts Czerka as the dark side option (in no small part due to the murderous business practices of Czerka employees), the initial choice presented to the player isn't between good and evil, but naïve idealism and pragmatic responsibility.There's a sense throughout *The Sith Lords* that the game is, through choices such as this, resisting the black-and-white moral philosophy forced upon it by the franchise.

Touching down on the surface of one planet, for instance, the player is presented with a textbook western RPG scenario. A downtrodden NPC asks for a sliver of the player's charity. If the player provides the handout, their mentor, Kreia, demonstrates the consequences of such generosity by showing the beggar subsequently being mugged for the offering. It's rare to see a game offering moral decisions and then attempting to convince the player of their hollowness once the experience points have been dished out, and it's even rarer in this particular universe – Star Wars deals unironically in terms like light and dark, a philosophy which, through scenes like this, *The Sith Lords* attempts to deconstruct. It's telling that, in contrast to the first game's cackling proto-Vader, *The Sith Lords*' principal villain is a being from George Lucas's worst nightmares – a nihilistic moral relativist.

Like the original KOTOR, The Sith Lords gives players the opportunity to move either way along a sliding scale between pure innocence and evil

The game attempts to integrate the complexities and vagaries of its characters and writing through use of an 'influence' system that, in theory, could have bypassed light/dark dichotomy altogether. Influence measures how much sway the player has over individual party members, and can result in the opening of further conversation options as well as the eventual opportunity to convert several members of your crew to the Jedi code. Unfortunately, many characters can only be influenced by performing heinously evil or uncompromisingly good acts in front of them, and players who fixed themselves to a single moral path would have to leave those party members' secrets forever unknown.

The most disappointing aspect of *The Sith Lords*, however, is a simple one. It isn't finished. *The Sith Lords*' final act, which takes place on the dramatic landscape of the perennially apocalyptic Malachor V, is one of the most frustrating in gaming

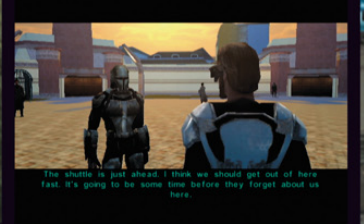
Obsidian served up some esoteric teammates. Bao-Dur should be recognisable as a greener version of Darth Maul, though the oddest would have to be spherical droid G0-T0







The Sith Lords' minigames – both lifted from the original *KOTOR* – retain the first game's disparity in quality. Swoop racing (below) is a chore, and a glitchy one at that, but card game Pazaak is a mildly addictive slice of galactic Blackjack





Crafting your own Lightsaber is as satisfying an outlet for self-expression as any character customisation screen



history for the way that all that is good about the game – conversation trees, character interaction, quality writing – is abandoned in favour of a hopeless solo slog through wave after wave of identical enemies.

Stories of publishers rushing games out for optimum launch windows (in this case Christmas 2004) are common enough, but *The Sith Lords* has become particularly infamous due to the large amount of cut material still lingering on the disc. It's a volume of assets large enough that an entire modding community emerged dedicated to 'restoring' the game to that which its creators intended (see 'Sith mods').

While much of the material amounts to merely additional locations and scenarios, the content stripped away from the game's final act was, to all intents and purposes, the ending itself. Whereas the original *KOTOR*, and indeed most other games that list dramatic moral choices as a back-of-the-box selling point, ensures that the player's moral decisions are reflected principally by the player themselves, *The Sith Lords*' final act was to have been the culmination of the player's interactions with and influence they'd had over their crew. Teammates would have splintered and fought for the player's affection, or made a rushed and hopeless attempt to rescue them from the villain's clutches. Confronting the player with the outcome of their decisions by having those choices reflected by the game's supporting cast was a trick employed by *BioShock 2*, but could have been the legacy of Obsidian's game almost six years earlier.

Obsidian's intelligent RPG teetered on the cusp of greatness, but in the end, it couldn't escape the shadow of BioWare's straightforward adventure. Not an Attack Of The Clones-style disaster, but not quite The Empire Strikes Back either, *The Sith Lords* is a huge canvas full of blank patches.

The game's ending, stripped bare in the way it is, puts all the elements in place for a climax that never arrives – one its fans still scrabble to create for themselves. Even if the final chapter appears, it makes little difference to the game of 2004, and none at all to BioWare's upcoming MMORPG *The Old Republic*. In its sidestory feel, frayed ends and overambition, *KOTOR II* is a microcosm of where Star Wars went. Grand ideas, constantly failing to live up to great expectations.

SITH MODS

Ironically for a community that formed in a bid to undo the damage of a strained development period, *The Sith Lords*' modding community has encountered several hurdles of its own. Originally, focus centred on the efforts of Team Gizka's The Sith Lords Restoration project, an ambitious modification that sought to use the data files found on the disc as well as work of their own creation to produce the game Obsidian had intended. But, as of 2009, that project has stalled. In September, however, a second project, The Sith Lords Restored Content Mod (tinyurl.com/tslmod), achieved its aims of restoring as much content as possible from what was left on the disc, and alleviates much, but not all, of the damage brought about by the game's rushed development period.

SLRCM



THE MAKING OF…

IT CAME FROM THE DESERT

Cinemaware's adventure was a showcase for 16bit hardware and gave B-movies a run for their money. Not bad for a game riddled with bugs

ORIGINAL FORMAT: **AMIGA** PUBLISHER: **MIRRORSOFT** DEVELOPER: **CINEMAWARE** ORIGIN: **US** RELEASE: **1989**

David Riordan was driving around Aspen, Colorado when he first realised the power of videogames. The weird thing was, he was actually sitting 2,000 miles away in Massachusetts at the time. Hired as a consultant by Lucasfilm in 1980, Riordan spent much of the year ferreting out new technology that might interest the movie company. Among the things he came across was MIT's Aspen Movie Map – a LaserDisc-driven simulation of the famous ski town.

As he waggled a joystick in Massachusetts and propelled himself through onscreen Aspen, the film producer felt like he'd discovered the missing link between two media. "I had always been a games player," he says, "and I always wanted to make games that were like movies. But when you looked at things like the Atari VCS, the games on it were just bits of light showing some guy swinging on a jungle vine or whatever. They weren't of interest to any of us who had come out of the film business. They were programmers' toys, basically."

As one of the creators of the ill-fated LaserDisc game *Freedom Fighter*, Riordan hoped to change all that by using footage from Japanese anime Galaxy Express 999 as the basis of an interactive movie-game. But when the LaserDisc craze stalled in the mid-'80s, he became disheartened and decided to head back to the movie business.

"I was bemoaning to someone about how I thought it was a lost opportunity and they said: 'Can I show you something?' So they took me to this computer called an Amiga and loaded up Cinemaware's first game, *Defender Of The Crown*. I just freaked out. The first thing I saw was the classic Cinemaware thing – the princess with big breasts. I remember my wife at the time going, 'What the hell is that?' I was like, 'It's a game'.



She says, 'It's not like any game I've ever seen before…'"

Mrs Riordan was right. It wasn't just a game. It was a game that was pretending to be a movie, and her husband knew immediately that he wanted in on the action. So he dropped Cinemaware's owner Bob Jacob a fan letter. A few days later, the phone rang. "Bob said: 'You have this really weird resumé. Come see me because we're looking for people who know how to tell a good story. We're doing movies, but we're just doing them in this videogame form'."

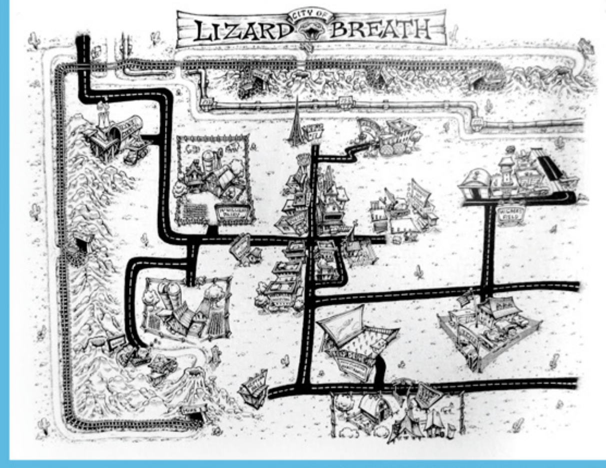
Cinemaware didn't need a mission statement. Everything you needed to know about the company was in its name: it was dedicated to making games for 16bit platforms that were inspired by, marketed like, and just as entertaining as movies. Based in Thousand Oaks in Ventura County, California, the developer was small-scale – a husband and wife team consisting of Bob and Phyllis Jacob. When Riordan arrived for an interview, he discovered a startup with boxes all over the floor and no desks, but plenty of cinephile passion.

Bob Jacob sat Riordan down and gave him a list of ideas he'd come up with for future games. He had just one question: if you had to do a game based on a movie, what would it be? Riordan scanned the list and tried to think of something original. "I told him that I'd probably do a big bug movie. You could have B-characters, big monsters, it'd be fun. You'd build this little town in the desert and have ants turn up. Bob looked at me and said: 'That's the one I didn't think of'."

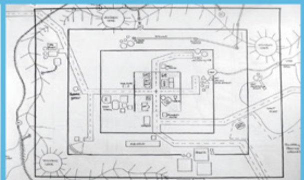
The unofficial template for *It Came From The Desert* was Them (1954), the cult Cold War sci-fi movie about ants mutated by nuclear testing. Despite tweaking the basic premise (here it's a falling meteor that's the



The ticking clock in *It Came From The Desert* forces you to move quickly throughout. If you don't, the ants will come streaming into view and overrun everything in Lizard Breath, including the gas station attendant







***It Came From The Desert* plays out in the fictional desert town of Lizard Breath. Riordan treated the game as though it was a movie, and created sketches of its locations before having models built**

MMM, SUGAR…

How do you top giant ants? What about ant-headed humans? Using the same game engine, *Antheads: It Came From The Desert II* (1990) was more an expansion pack than a true sequel. But it enabled the Cinemaware team to build on the richness of their original with a new player character and revamped plot that saw infected townfolk grow mandibles, antennae and big fat bug eyes (they also have a strange taste for sugar cubes). Capturing the body-snatching paranoia of '50s sci-fi movies perfectly, *Antheads* pulled off a delicate balancing act between familiarity and freshness.



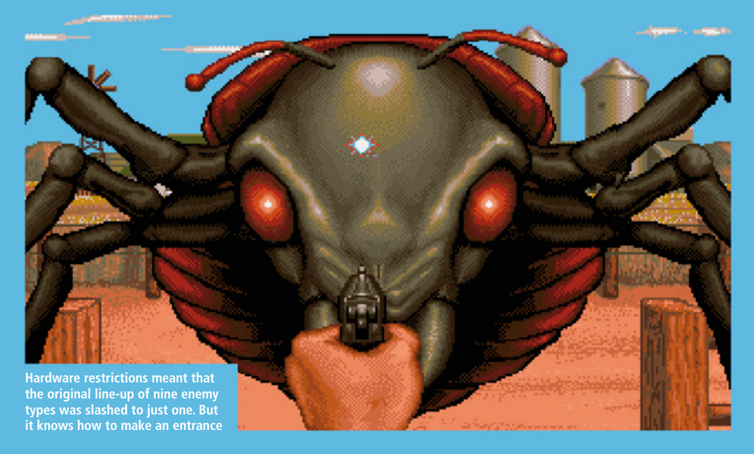
inciting incident), Riordan stayed close to the movie's vibe. The action takes place in the California town of Lizard Breath, a desert outpost complete with a buxom, Jane Russell-esque vamp, a stuttering gas station attendant and a local switchblade-carrying bully. It's less an ironic parody of '50s B-movies than a loving pastiche. "We wanted to take the player into that world, not make fun of it from arm's length," recalls **Ken Melville**, who penned the game's playful script.

For Riordan, the key to the gameplay was drama, and he approached the game design as if he was directing a movie. He hired a storyboard artist to sketch out locations and characters; his secretary built a model of Lizard Breath using toy train buildings. And, most of all, he concentrated on the game's narrative.

Putting you in the role of a scientist, the game forces you to race against the clock through its three-act structure – first, investigating strange events by talking to townsfolk, then gathering evidence to convince the authorities, and eventually leading the National Guard against the ants. Peppering the plot are varied arcade minigames – crop duster flying, knife-fighting, firstperson ant battles and top-down ant nest exploration – all woven into the over-arching meta-story in what had already become the distinctive Cinemaware style.

"One of the things I insisted on having was a timeline," remembers Riordan, who designed the game to play out in realtime, second for second. "It's a narrative device. You can't wait around. If you don't go and do something, even if that something is wrong and you lose, if you just sit and play it cautious, the ants aren't going to stop, they're going to overrun the town." It was a classic dramatic technique and it's no accident that the game's vibe – from the gradual reveal of its monsters right down to the score's ominously insistent chords – is reminiscent of Jaws.

Telling such a story on an Amiga 500, rather than on the LaserDiscs Riordan had originally been interested in, was a big leap. Lead programmer Randy Smith worked hard to juggle Riordan's ambitions with the practicalities of the hardware. "At the beginning, I wanted nine different monsters and all these different scenarios. Randy came back and said, 'You can have one monster and three scenarios – that's it'. Even then it was a three-disk game, which was unheard of in the Amiga world at that time," says Riordan. In many ways it was fitting: giant bugs naturally deserved a giant game.



Hardware restrictions meant that the original line-up of nine enemy types was slashed to just one. But it knows how to make an entrance





Like all of Cinemaware's releases, the game is a graphically rich experience. The downside? The Amiga version sprawled over three 3.5" disks





Everyone knows ants love picnics, but few would guess they're also keen game designers. During production on *It Came From The Desert*, real ants would frequently crawl out of the woodwork. "We'd be at our office or a bar or one of our houses, and whenever we started getting into the project, ants would show up," says Riordan. "It was really weird but it made us feel like we were on to something." Is he pulling our leg? Melville says not. "Nope, it's true! They'd show in little lines streaming in through the window and stuff! I think they were trying to tell him something…"

The ants certainly had a vested interested in the project but they needn't have worried – they were in safe hands. Cinemaware's approach proved so successful, in fact, that it even snagged the interest of Hollywood. Executives from Sony Pictures flew down to Thousand Oaks for a look around. "Cinemaware had pioneered the idea of movie games with *King Of Chicago* and such," says Melville, "and so Hollywood thought, 'Hmmm, it makes sense to branch into gaming with these guys'."

It never came to anything, but after Cinemaware eventually closed its doors in 1991, Riordan continued his interest in cinematic games by working on a full-motion video version of *It Came From The Desert* (see 'Turbo Charged'). Later, he also worked on the Philips CD-i title *Voyeur* – a Hitchcock-inspired mystery that blended real-life actors with digital backdrops.

"There was a real love of movies at Cinemaware. We tried to get to the heart of what we liked about movies and celebrate it"

Still, *It Came From The Desert* retains a special place in his affections. "A lot of Cinemaware's success was to do with branding," Riordan explains. "Bob had a great talent for that – the way the posters and boxes were designed was just brilliant. But there was also a real love of movies. We tried to get to the heart of what we liked about movies and celebrate it. We tried to take all the best elements of fun, tension and drama and actually do something that was really an ode to the form rather than just a translation of the movie."

So, next time you hear someone say that games based on movies never work, point them in the direction of *It Came From The Desert*. It's the best licensed movie game for which no one bothered securing a licence.



TURBO CHARGED

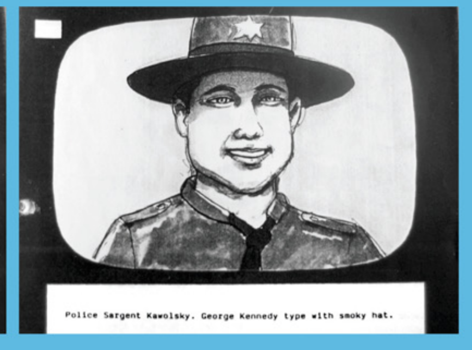
In 1992, *It Came From The Desert* got a revamp for NEC's TurboGrafx-CD featuring full-motion video of live actors replacing the original's animated characters. "I was back in a world I was comfortable in," says Riordan, who enjoyed returning to his film-making roots and shooting actors against green screens. His colleague Melville was thrilled for different reasons. "We finally got to have a babe," he laughs. "I mean, there *were* no babes in 8bit graphics! We were finally in a 16bit world with a CD to pump tons of data for FMV and so we cast this totally hot Swedish actress. I can't tell you any more about her. Use your imagination…"





Riordan hired a storyboard artist to depict the game's characters and locations





REGION SPECIFIC: GUILDFORD

If videogames, with their head-turning profits, loyal fanbases and avant-garde roots, are a parallel to the modern music industry, then Guildford, perhaps, is their Abbey Road. There's an undeniable sound to the region's development scene, one that riffs on Bullfrog's legacy but manages to improvise all on its own. The artists here are many and varied, but close enough for a pint. From Lionhead's poster child *Fable* franchise to Fireproof's triple-A outsourcing design work, and around the block to Codemasters' ever-expanding fortress of white walls and pristine hedges, it's a town of ideas, fuelled by passion and defined by a community spirit that many other areas would kill for.

The heritage of the Bullfrog founding fathers may loom large, but it's an area that has a rich cultural history of quirky and colourful creations with a very British flavour. Lewis Carroll completed Through The Looking Glass here, the cathedral from The Omen stands tall on the horizon, and Monty Python even has a connection via Terry Jones' primary school years.

Guildford is as much about forward-thinking as looking back. As a collective of videogame creators, it's a group riding every hardware wave, from PlayStation Move and Project Natal to Apple's iPad, and it's a group constantly competing to better itself and its neighbours. It prides creativity and ideas over manpower and margins, but it's not in denial of the cushion that big studio backing can bring. It's a place of warped angles, mish-mashed architecture and disorientating contours, but also a place of balance. Work, life and play collide where the chorus of the British game industry really began to get heard. The new sound of Guildford is an old tune played with the latest instruments. And it's worth listening to.

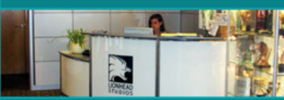








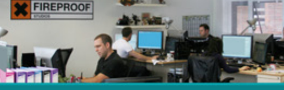


















SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW

Fertile creative ground, deep game development roots and burgeoning cross-company relations. Welcome to the eclectic county town of Surrey

Guildford is a town of contrasts. A pristine Porsche showroom overlooks a canal dotted with kayaks paddling up and down. Brand-new cars battle for right of way on narrow streets built for horse-drawn carriages. There's a distinct sense of an overlap, a coexistence and a mixture of cultures and timelines. It comes across, most obviously, in the architecture. Older buildings are a stone's throw from 21st-century developments. The High Street is a mélange of new brands and old shop fronts. There's as much a sense of old as new. Students swagger the side streets in scenester garb while the gentry glide by in trilby hats.

This convergence of past and present is something that's written into the area's videogame scene, too. You'll hear the name Bullfrog mentioned time and again, with good reason. Established in 1987 by Peter Molyneux and Les Edgar, it was the house that British gaming built. From *Theme Park* and *Syndicate* to *Magic Carpet* and *Dungeon Keeper*, the portfolio of the now-obsolete studio is one that, to many, birthed a videogame Britpack. Clinical and methodical in the structuring of game mechanics, yet always willing to throw up on its own pavements, a line can be drawn from Bullfrog's output to the sensations that emanate from the region today. Think of the tongue-in-cheekiness of *Fable*, or the meticulous attention to detail being applied to the games at Codemasters' studio here. And let's not forget Media Molecule. Now the face of Sony's indie





Photography: © Guildford Borough Council

inclinations, the creator of *LittleBigPlanet* has taken a few short years to stamp its brand of witticism and undiluted sense of creativity on to the psyche of gaming development worldwide. It's a testament to the integrity of the Guildford scene that it has attracted so much investment, and always with the incentive of working with creative and driven people. EA and Codemasters both set up shop in the last decade at premises with the capacity for growth but, revealingly, not aggressive expansion.

It's a testament to the Guildford scene that it has attracted so much investment, and always with the incentive of working with creative and driven people

If there's a problem with Guildford, it's the disorientation you'll experience as a newcomer. It's an angular, uneven city in which it can be difficult to get your bearings. The cinema could be mistaken for a riverside boathouse, and the central Friary shopping centre is as inviting as a fortress. But then that's also part of the appeal. You're not sure what's around each corner, whether it's green or grey, great or small, gaming's future or its past. With the exception of EA's gargantuan glass home base, the





studios here are invisible to the untrained eye, working behind, above and within other buildings, camouflaged in the tightly packed city centre. There's no chest-beating. If Guildford is the future of the UK industry, it's a future with its head down and its eyes firmly on its work.

If you nip out for a drink in one of Guildford's many pubs, you'll likely find yourself walking away with a magazine's worth of exclusive gaming scoops

The lineage of Guildford's current crop is as rich as the town's history. If you join the dots of the teams here, you'll have a very messy page indeed. It's a complex tapestry of talent that weaves and mingles across its lifetime, and one brimming with people who are well aware of – and many motivated by – the legacy of what went before. "It all started with Bullfrog," we're reminded constantly, but there's certainly inspiration from the broader canvas of arts and enterprise in the region.

The Electric Theatre in the heart of town is no stranger to open-mic nights, staging improvised and more structured performance art, inviting





and encouraging its denizens to engage and get involved in the workings of an artistic community with many moving parts. It's a cue that the videogame development scene has taken with gusto, each studio with a finger firmly on the pulse thanks to the work being done in the bordering studios. If you nip out for a drink in one of Guildford's many pubs, you'll likely find yourself walking away afterwards with a magazine's worth of exclusive gaming scoops (all with tipsily arranged, unofficial non-disclosure agreements attached, of course).

The cutting-edge talent pockets of designers such as Fireproof, with experience as an outsourcing facility for titles such as *LittleBigPlanet* and *Burnout Paradise*, is a sign of things to come and a new, more freeform industry model. Fireproof also highlights a defining characteristic of the Guildford groove: the spirit of independence. This town, as we're repeatedly reminded during our visit, isn't London. The way of life here features none of the freneticism often associated with the nation's capital, but it's close enough to reach via a leisurely train ride. It means that the companies here aren't overflowing or uncontrollable – there's an intimacy and identity to each that communicates family rather than formality, from Media Molecule's homely kitchen to the drumkit in Lionhead's canteen. The pervading theme is that everything begins and ends with ideas, which is just how it all started out.



COLLECTIVE REASONING

It's more of a family reunion at EA's swanky Guildford premises than a business meeting. There's barely more than one degree of separation between each participant, and – as many point out – the building itself is familiar to a good portion of these figureheads. As we get under way, with **Harvey Elliot** and **Jonathan Bunney** of EA Bright Light, Media Molecule co-founder **Alex Evans**, director of Fireproof Studios **Barry Meade**, managing director of Wonderland Software **Matthew Wiggins**, studio manager of Codemasters Guildford **Adrian Bolton**, chief publishing officer of Lionhead Studios **Stuart Whyte**, CEO of nDreams **Patrick O'Luanaigh**, studio director of Supermassive Games **Harvey Wheaton** and director of digital media at Kingston University **Karen L Cham**, it becomes clear that not only is this an intimate community, familiar with the practices of each studio, but it's a group with a clear understanding of its place in the more general videogame landscape.

What's great about the industry in Guildford?
Alex Evans: There are good studios and people.
Matthew Wiggins: There's great history here, thanks to Bullfrog.
Harvey Elliot: The heritage here has built up. In many regions it moves from one place to another. It's not often in the UK you get big pockets of development like this.
MW: For contracting and outsourcing, to have a fluid workforce that can actually work for multiple companies over a period of time – that's getting closer here.
HE: I think the community in Guildford is changing into an industry in Guildford. That's a real change for the business – it's so many different disciplines and so many different skills all within a small area. We used to do a lot of hiring all over the UK, but now it feels like people are coming to Guildford to be hired.



Communication, education and collaboration are at the heart of Guildford's long-standing success as a UK game development hub. That everyone appears to know everyone else seems to help, too…

Harvey Wheaton: When you do hire people from outside, there's a really strong incentive to come to Guildford because they know if it doesn't work out here then there's this company and that company, too… There are options.
AE: When you say to people that we're doing outsourcing, they assume it's to foreign clients. The fact is that we can get all our services and quality people – essentially on the same level of integration as staff that are sitting in the studio – but they work for another Guildford company. There's a trust level here that's really high. It's incestuous.
Barry Meade: It's the same model as Hollywood and Silicon Valley, where you have this spurious relationship of communication, in this case between companies that are all working together and seeing each other in the same forums. There's a spread of knowledge there, and eventually you'll get a flavour out of that.

Is there a creative cross-pollination that arises out of this community?
AE: At the pub [laughs]. You can't talk about the details of your project but you can one-up each other. It's friendly competitiveness. Like with Hello Games: we really tried to persuade them not to do a startup and come and work with us. But they did start their company and I'm inspired by what they're doing – more so because it's in Guildford. There's no external excuse – it sounds really simplistic but it makes it more relevant when it's here. We're a resilient bunch and there's failure in Guildford too, but people have stuck around through it. It's brilliant.
BM: Totally. One of the things that history gives you is expertise. I think this is one of the best development communities on the planet, full stop. Some of the best people in the world are here or have been through here. And it is because of the pedigree.

AE: You're working with the best people in the world who've learned how to do it as well as how not to do it. Having people like Peter Molyneux around, I realised how amazing he was at supporting risky things. There are lots of companies in Guildford that'll take those risks and stratospherically fail, but it doesn't matter.
BM: It's a lot more balls-out. For me it's because of Molyneux and Bullfrog. They set the standard of "We're going to do what we like, what we think the public want to buy, and the publishers will have to play catch up".

How do the larger development facilities fit in with the independent community spirit that exists here?
HW: I think there's been a really big change in publisher mentality towards smaller developers. In the past, it was very much: go and find a startup company, start working on them, buy them up, assimilate them, smash all the culture out and wonder why it isn't working any more. Whereas now, when Sony approached us, they really liked the independent studio model and Guildford as a place, so it was very much at arm's length to let it flourish.

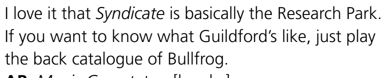
Stuart Whyte: It's similar with Lionhead and Microsoft as well; we've got a good relationship now. But you're right about that old-school Microsoft/Sony/EA model of squeezing the life out of them.
Jonathan Bunney: I think it's definitely changed over the last ten years. Certainly at EA, individuality is actively encouraged.
Patrick O'Luanaigh: You've got indie developers, console developers, web developers – all these different things now. At least half of our staff come up from different areas, and that's a huge advantage for us.
Adrian Bolton: And there is overlap. It's amazing that we're touching all these areas. It's almost like an ecosystem.
AE: In terms of the architecture of the place too, you can see it all in the Lionhead and Bullfrog games.



"I love it that Syndicate is basically the Research Park. If you want to know what Guildford's like, just play the back catalogue of Bullfrog"







I love it that *Syndicate* is basically the Research Park. If you want to know what Guildford's like, just play the back catalogue of Bullfrog.
AB: *Magic Carpet*, too [laughs].
AE: We tried to get that vibe of the Bullfrog history [with *LittleBigPlanet*], and then combine that with Criterion's ability to ship – the high-quality technical achievement and the console mentality. I love that here in Guildford we were able to take those two things and do a startup.

How does education in the area feed into Guildford's game development culture?
Karen L Cham: The main thing for us is to produce people with specialist technical skills but who can also work as part of a team. I was brought into Kingston University to make the courses industry-facing. We've got a number of visiting lecturers now and we're looking to increase that.
HW: We find everyone has jumped on the bandwagon of games design courses and we have so much rubbish in terms of the process generally. We'd love the universities to shape the courses and give us those specialist skills that we need. Unfortunately there are so many people out there doing courses that are totally inappropriate to games.
AB: You look at how long a course takes to put together and how quickly the industry changes…
AE: Maybe that's a reason not to teach those ephemeral skills. Basically, all I care about when I get a CV is what they've made. That's all that matters. It's about making things with ridiculous, over-the-top constraints. There's a programming test we give people. It's a broken copy of *Space Invaders*, and, as in a real game development process, we set an impossible list of tasks and give four hours to complete it. But we don't say what's important. What's interesting is which aspects people choose to tackle first. I love the idea of a university course that's about making things, but also about constraints.
KLC: What you're talking about is a generic skill: creative problem solving. What we're trying to engender at Kingston is that when you're working to parameters, it's like with materials: you can't make glass do what rubber can. If the client wants X and Y by Friday, you have to work out how to deliver it. We even started wondering if we could have an X Factor-style system, where you fire students off modules because in the real world you'd lose your job.
HE: The second part is the fundamentals. You can't look at games as they were a few years ago. If you're an engineer, you need great computer science skills or mathematics skills because those will always be valuable. You can't necessarily teach those things [as a developer] but you can certainly hone them, along with a delivery focus.
BM: It's really a talent-based industry, it's not about process. As much as we've all been taught about process, bigger companies – no insults – like that idea. I believe it's an industry led by talent and





teams I saw had games that were either ridiculously over-ambitious or under-ambitious, which is great because that's what you want. If someone had nailed it first time, they probably shouldn't have been at university – and obviously we never do, either…
KLC: Surely you're always on time and on budget?
MW: Guildford maybe isn't the best example [laughs]. But to see a team of three guys who decided they were going to make an MMO – and eight weeks in they're knackered because they've been crunching, and completely demoralised because they couldn't deliver the thing they were aiming for – that's a great learning experience because they're getting to do that before doing it in the industry.
PO: We're trying something a little bit different, along those lines, with the University of Reading. We're sponsoring some of the final year projects this year and we can give the students projects that are relevant to us. We can say: "Let's do some Facebook stuff." And hopefully they can get to see what's relevant to us now. We've got a lot of people who are familiar with the film and TV industry. There's a writer who's fantastic, not familiar with games at all, but he's just a really talented writer. It's healthy to get people who aren't just living, breathing games all creatively. Part of the problem the education establishment has is that it looks at it and thinks it just has to teach the process. It's actually much more difficult than that – when it comes down to the interview, it'll be talent that gets you through and not qualifications. It's not just a problem with education, it's a problem with us too. We have a problem admitting that we're a creative industry.
MW: One of my real bugbears is people who are overly specialised. When I got into the industry, there wasn't such a drive to specialise so fast – I started as a designer and programmer and had lots of opportunity to contribute in many different ways. That doesn't happen so much any more in big teams. The inclination is to have these specialised roles that a lot of education supports. And it's not a good thing. You want to be able to chuck things at them and have them come up with creative solutions. I personally don't think that happens when someone's been driven to doing a very small role.
HW: People forget that they're making a game. They think in terms of making an asset or a piece of audio. It's about encouraging people, regardless of discipline, to contribute to the process of making a game. The more you silo it, the more you lose that.
AE: There are different approaches at different universities. I like the idea of courses teaching valuable skills for this environment. I remember Molyneux sitting me down before university and saying: "Alex, whatever you do, don't go and study bloody computer science – you can already program, so for God's sake, put something in your head other than what you already know." It took the pressure off – at university, I wasn't worrying about how it was relevant to games.
KLC: We're trying to create an environment where we foster innovation. We're trying to take the art school model and the computer school model and mix them up. We're looking for a cross-fertilisation and a hybridisation that facilitates invention. We've got some modules where everybody just hangs about together and jams their way through the kit.
AE: I'd love to see a course that shows what game development is really like. When you get young people in, the problem isn't normally the talent, it's that they have no idea what it is to actually make a game. Like, what does it mean to track your bugs to deliver on time? Although that sounds like process, it's actually about taking your raw talent and applying it in a way that translates on to a Blu-ray disc. Otherwise, you have green people coming in drawing 50 concepts on their first day, saying, "This is amazing!" and then a month later they're totally demoralised because none of that was relevant or channelled towards what the team needed. How do we show people the reality?
MW: There are some good competitions that really help students to understand. I visited a university in London recently. Over ten weeks, they have to come up with a concept, design and implement it. The their lives – people from different areas and industries. Maybe it's to do with the kind of projects we do, because we're not doing traditional console games at nDreams.
JB: There's a difference between graduates and people with experience.

The industry has changed a lot over the last decade – how have the effects of that evolution been felt in Guildford?

BM: Outsourcing in general has arrived in the games industry in the last five years. It actually seems to have arrived here quicker than it did in the US as well. I've been to the US a few times and they're quite a few years behind in terms of their attitude towards outsourcing and what can be achieved by it. Is a bad economy good for small companies? I think it probably is, believe it or not. At least for companies with something to offer.
PO: It was so hard just five years ago when the PS2 was out – it was so different; you needed to raise a lot of money to get going.
BM: To be fair, it always existed on the PC. There was everything from homebrew to indie. Then the next-gen consoles came along, the PC market died and Microsoft and Sony are trying to absorb that creative force with XBLA and so on.
HE: But two things have come in the last five or ten years that make your kind of business [Fireproof Studios] more relevant. The scale of games is so much

bigger, which means it's harder for teams to make it themselves, and the nature of the hardware means the visuals need to be better, as well as the gameplay and the fidelity. You need companies like yours who have specialised talent with great expertise.
BM: It's the sign of a maturing industry.
MW: There's an interesting flip side to that. My company [Wonderland Studios] wouldn't exist if it wasn't possible to do things a lot cheaper on a smaller scale, as with iPhone and iPad. I think the last five years have changed the industry massively, and the reason that there's quite a few of us sitting around here is because of the changes.
AE: I'm inspired by the indie game scene.
MW: The problem with the indie scene is that it's not business-led enough. I remember working on *Black & White 2* and I sat down with Peter [Molyneux] and said I was thinking of leaving to do a startup. And Peter said: "Great, but the industry right now just doesn't support startups." There just wasn't a market for games that didn't cost £5 million to make. On the one hand, in the last five years, we've seen the budget of triple-A games go up even more – now









we're talking 20, 30 million quid. But at the same time, there have been these other platforms, opportunities and markets for smaller games to come up. Which means you can create a startup without millions of pounds behind it. You can create something that can get into the hands of users that only takes six months and three people to make.
AB: You also need the closed platform to monetise it.
AE: But this is a cycle, not something fundamentally new. The industry has changed in the past five years, but there have been waves of startups in Guildford and they essentially correlate with new closed platforms and each new generation of console. Media Molecule was: "Ooh! PS3 – let's jump on that bandwagon." I think you're absolutely right, the time in 2004 wasn't the time to do it, but the cycle came round. Now we're going for PS3 and [Wonderland Studios] is going for iPad. It can scoop you up. In a company of 30, we've hired four people from our own community now, which is interesting. There was a bloke who was a builder in Devon and we just emailed him and said we loved his levels. He thought it was a wind-up, so the community started emailing us saying we had to get this guy. So he turns up holding his PS3 in a borrowed suit – never had a job interview in his life, he didn't know what to. I love little things like that. You get these cycles of the industry, and on the upscale you can just tap this wave of creative people.
BM: I think there's probably a downward pressure for developers in larger studios to start up smaller ones. I'm sure there are others like us [Fireproof] who are in larger studios and feel like they've got lots to offer, but can't break out of the structure. And they feel like they've got much more energy than they're giving. In the industry, as it stands, 80 per cent of people are working in big studios making licensed titles for publishers. It's difficult in a mature industry, with people who have gotten really good after five or ten years knocking out games, to find a way to start up a studio.
HW: It goes back to the ecosystem. Without the backbone of the big stuff and the diversity of the things we used to work on – and if it was all fragmented – I don't think it would survive.
AE: I love the idea that everyone in this room has started up and been acquired.
BM: And look at Lionhead – that was a startup and now it's the mega employer of Guildford. The cycle also goes through those studios. Lionhead was a tiny startup of seven people out of Bullfrog, and it just mushroomed itself. Hopefully Media Molecule will do that, and hopefully Fireproof will too.
AE: Maybe that's a characteristic of Guildford – we don't have the indie chap with a capital 'I' who can't take the filthy man's dollar. I think everyone at Media Molecule is happy to take the filthy man's dollar if it means we can make what we want. I think that's a characteristic of Guildford: no one here represents the view of just churning it out.
MW: It's a balance. At the end of the day, the more money you have, hopefully, the better the game you can make. You have to have money. If you can run both of those cycles well, you can make more money and make another great game. That's definitely something about Guildford: it comes out of some of the formative companies that started here. They weren't just about being purely creative, they were about making a really solid business as well. Having the big companies here is super-cool. It feels like you've got these pillars of very strong companies here, and we exist within that structure.
JB: Although we're all technically in competition with one another, we're actually in competition with the rest of the world.
PO: It's a unique blend of creativity and commerciality here that nobody else has got.

It seems that you want to control the number of employees at your studios carefully, so that you don't expand too far and become too big.
AE: But, on the other hand, we're happy to work with other studios. *LBP* was made by Media Molecule and many other people, including a studio in Sweden. I love that ferment. Sweden is the dark horse of Europe… or the good horse.
KLC: I've heard of "Swedish digital" being what people are looking for…
HW: Sounds dodgy to me… [Laughter.]
PO: We're seeing more partnership deals. We're seeing contractors come into projects, lots of external partners, like with motion-capture studios who might help fund part of the game. It's lovely being small – you can do that sort of stuff on a per-project basis and not have to invest everything in new IP.
AE: Out of interest, how does that model work?





Do you tie it together with an auteur? How do you prevent it being design by committee?
PO: We still keep control of the creative side, the design and coding.
BM: Guildford is a good place for that co-development model. It's something we're pushing for at Fireproof – to take on discrete parts of games. That model, I firmly believe, has to come to games.
AE: My favourite thing in the world is the Conway Law. It was coined by a chap called [Mevlin] Conway in 1968 and it's basically the idea that the product you make is a reflection of the team that made it. So if you have a team on the west coast and a team in the east, you'll get a game in two halves unless you have really good communication between them. I don't mind the fact that you have to build games with different groups, or that it will be a multi-headed beast. But if a particular group is hated and will only phone up every Friday, then that bit of the game will be a horrible side-quest that no one will give a fuck about. That's why we work with people in Guildford, and why these clusters build in England.
BM: The OECD did a study about the impact of digital communication on business. It was at the height of the web bubble. They actually found it didn't affect things at all. It didn't add anything to the success of companies or education institutions. They found it was physical proximity and the passing of ideas, face to face, that defined whether or not those people would be successful, and whether or not they believed in ideas in the first place, because they didn't take it seriously. I'd love to see us start to take that more seriously, where we'd improve each other by working together. If we're constantly separating each other for control of each space, then we won't really come together as a dev community.
PO: If you look at San Francisco, there are a lot of new social companies based out there, and they talk so much. They're not secretive. And that whole area goes so much further than others.
BM: The areas of the world that have it sussed are the ones that understand about that passing on of knowledge and ideas. For example, in earlier times, it used to be really difficult to get an artist to change artwork. It was difficult to get people to think about the bigger picture. But by the time I got to Criterion, it changed – it was then all about iteration. If you don't iterate, you won't get quality software. There was a psychological change. It had to do with the passing on of tiny bits of information. That made everything more efficient and you could solve problems. That way of working can operate on a company-to-company basis as well.
HW: We really value that inside the studio. I take a great pride in the lack of email traffic. Everything's face to face. But the same doesn't yet apply to the wider community.
AE: Guildford isn't in a golden age of companies communicating, but it could be. Guildford represents huge potential.
MW: I think the games industry generally suffers from not sharing information. We have this conflict where it's technology tied to entertainment. And with entertainment, so much of it is driven by marketing. You're trying to manage hype, trying to manage a marketing plan and how you release information – that obviously conflicts. You go to GDC and you talk about what you've done, not what you're doing.
AE: Wouldn't it be awesome to sod all of the external needs and for the Guildford firms to trust each other enough to go into a room and play each other's unannounced games? We don't do that, but I have a feeling we could.
MW: It obviously depends on the company, though. For us [Wonderland Studios], it's easy, but for EA I'm guessing it's different. The secrecy is more important.
HE: But there are things you can do; techniques and approaches to problems can be shared more readily than what we're building. People go to places like GDC to learn from expertise. There's no reason we couldn't set that up more locally. It could help get some ideas flowing.



"Wouldn't it be awesome for the Guildford firms to trust each other enough to play each other's unannounced games?"

AE: I think the reason that hasn't happened is the fear of one fuck-up and it'll be dead. One person leaks something and that's it.
HW: I think the challenge is that we all work for a small number of highly competitive paymasters who are nervous about this sort of thing.
BM: That was there in the Bullfrog days, even with Criterion – we used to go to the pub and practically end up in fist fights over ridiculous things. There was far less commercial pressure. It was much easier to inspire employees back then than it is now, for that reason.

To end on a slightly abstract note, if Guildford had a 'sound', musically, what would it be?
MW: Morrissey?
HE: It's no one style. That's why it's unique. I think what makes Guildford special is the diversity.
AE: We're the bit in the club between the three rooms where you can hear all the music.

EA BRIGHT LIGHT

One of Guildford's largest studios has history on its side – and a commitment towards building its future

bright light

- **NAME:** EA Bright Light
- **LOCATION:** Guildford
- **FOUNDED:** 2007
- **EMPLOYEES:** 150
- **URL:** www.eabrightlight.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *Harry Potter* franchise, *Zubo*, *Theme Park*, *Syndicate*, *Populous*, *Dungeon Keeper*, *Hasbro Family Game Night*

It's difficult not to be impressed by the ecosystem at Electronic Arts' Guildford site. Each floor has its own identity and its own canon of brands. Everything is at hand, and every department – from the in-house audio studio to payroll to the branded EA merchandise store – is embedded here. It is a picture of modernity. Look a little more closely, however, and a contrasting image emerges, for Bright Light has its roots in Bullfrog, the developer founded in 1987 and purchased by EA seven years later. Today, various stalwarts of that era share their experience with more recent recruits, and together they've been enjoying success in the mainstream gaming market.

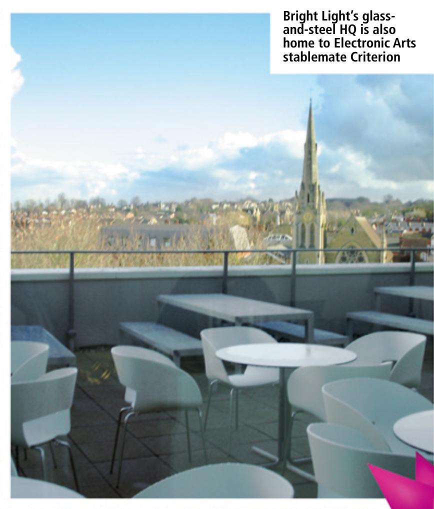
Chances are you've experienced a Bright Light production unknowingly. The studio has been quietly building a portfolio of franchise chart-busters that are unavoidable but often unheralded by the specialist press. From *Trivial Pursuit* and *Monopoly* to the hugely lucrative *Harry Potter* licence, it's a division that's dealt with franchises across a range of platforms in a variety of genres, and bridged the digital gap between traditional, family games and videogames. Which isn't to say it's a studio that's become staid or complacent. Signed Harry Potter cast photos lie about the place among the miniature figurines of a typical dev team, and the beanbag-strewn environment as a whole is more college than conservative, but this is home to a community hard at work with the most accomplished tools in the business.

It's a studio that, having stepped up ambition with each iteration of its core Harry Potter licence to date, is revving its engines for a change of direction with *Harry Potter And The Deathly Hallows* (due around the time of the next Potter film), making the culmination of the series what head of production **Jonathan Bunney** describes as "the first Harry Potter game that **Edge** readers would be interested in".



2009's ***Harry Potter And The Half-Blood Prince*** **(pictured) is Bright Light's most recent Potter outing, but the studio is promising to "go out with a bang" with the upcoming sequel**





Bright Light's glass-and-steel HQ is also home to Electronic Arts stablemate Criterion



Bright Light has its eye on the emerging online space, with a number of projects in production dedicated solely to the downloadable market. Its *Hasbro Family Game Night* has already been a success as a series of XBLA titles

Interview:
Harvey Elliott and Jonathan Bunney



Studio general manager

Head of production

What's the connection between EA and the town of Guildford?
Harvey Elliott: EA is the reason a lot of the games industry is in Guildford. If you go back to the beginning, we bought Bullfrog in 1995. Over the years, we've acquired Criterion and merged in our teams in the north west. We realised that the main UK studio wasn't thriving, and we wanted to place the strengths of individual teams. Criterion has a strong focus on its core game – it's a different audience to ours. We report to different parts of the organisation. We didn't feel like we should go back to being Bullfrog, so the name Bright Light was born.

What I loved about Bullfrog was that its games were accessible but they had a lot of depth. We still have Bullfrog people at Bright Light. It's about building the right game for the audience, but the great thing about Bullfrog was that they built things for themselves. If you were to start a studio today, you'd still choose Guildford because of the sheer amount of talent. It's the heart of development in the UK.

What is Bright Light's focus?
HE: It's slightly outside of core gamers – we have a broader audience appeal. We've made *Trivial Pursuit*, *Monopoly*, and have the Harry Potter relationship, which is coming up to ten years now.

We also recognise the advent of the digital platforms – we have experience there with *Hasbro Family Game Night* on XBLA. Those titles have taught us lessons about simplicity of play and accessibilty, so we'll be using that as a background for all of our other titles.

Behind what is a reimagining of classic games is an intricate delivery system, providing a space for people to play and enjoy our games on every system. From that, we've spun out a team to develop dedicated projects for XBLA and PlayStation Home.

We've put out a lot of products, but there are common features between them. We want to make great character action games. There's a destination in mind to get better and better at that. The plan this year, particularly with *Harry Potter And The Deathly Hallows*, is to blow it right out of the park. As a developer, you can choose to take last year's model and make Harry taller and give him stubble, or you can go out with a bang.

I don't want people to come here for what we did in the past, but for what we're going to do in the future.
Jonathan Bunney: At the end of a series you can either cash in or go for broke. We're going for broke. This is the grand finale. Basically, it's a thirdperson shooter with magic.

How do you think employees would describe EA Bright Light?
HE: I think a lot of people who work through their career have EA in mind one day. And people stay here for a long time. We have cutting-edge tech and development – people enjoy that and want to be a part of it. The important thing with our games is accessibility for the audience. This site houses development, finance, IT, online. What that gives us is a broader culture – as a studio we interact and socialise with the whole company while maintaining a dedicated space for each group.
JB: As a developer you get a much better sense of the market, even just by bumping into people in the coffee bar.


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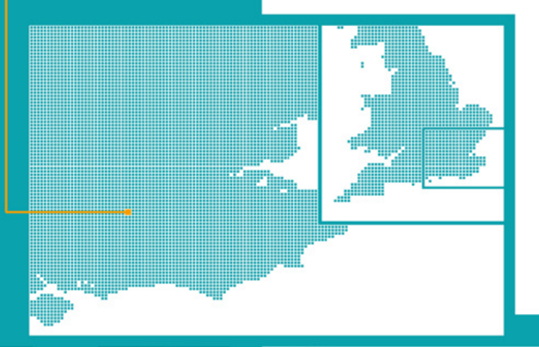

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SUPERMASSIVE GAMES

One of Guildford's youngest startups, Supermassive is leading the way developing for Sony's Move hardware

- **NAME:** Supermassive Games
- **LOCATION:** Guildford
- **FOUNDED:** 2007
- **EMPLOYEES:** 70
- **URL:** www.supermassivegames.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *Move Party*, plus more to be announced



Based right in the centre of Guildford, Supermassive Games has its sights on the sense of camaraderie that defines this region. The company was founded just three years ago and is now on the frontline of Sony's upcoming Move hardware, its experimental and pioneering work coming to fruition in the form of *Move Party*, a game aimed, as its name suggests, at the competitive but lucrative social market.

A stroll around the company's offices shows the inner workings of a relaxed and calm group of developers – without defined regiment – playing around with some of the most interesting technology out there. From the cardboard placeholder Move handsets (topped with coloured ping-pong balls serving a valuable purpose in the motion-detection process) to the keyboards and storyboards littered around the room, a mood of experimentation and optimism pervades throughout as it prepares for launch alongside Sony's hardware, while other projects bubble away in the background.

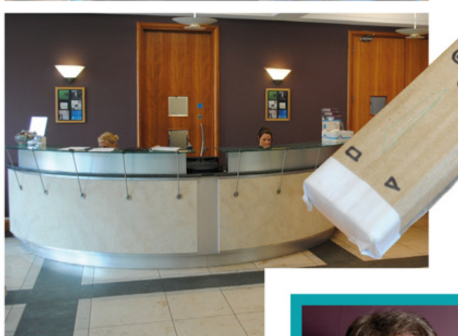
The youthfulness of the studio is counterbalanced by a mature, veteran backbone of staff with multimillion-selling, multiplatform stripes earned across decades of videogame history. The rapid expansion of Supermassive, meanwhile, is indicative of a concerted recruitment drive but also of the attraction this region has for fresh talent. Finally, there's the level of autonomy at the company, which points to a studio that's reaching for the stars but keeping its feet firmly on the ground.



Supermassive's first game, *Move Party*, will launch alongside Sony's motion-sensing hardware. A collection of minigames, it uses the PlayStation Eye part of the equation to reflect players and their environments onscreen, as well as placing virtual objects in their hands which can be used to interact with the game in many ways, depending on the challenge









Interview: Harvey Wheaton

Studio director

Where did the Supermassive Games story begin?
The company started up in 2007. A friend of mine, Pete Samuels [now managing director of Supermassive], had left EA a year or so before that and had gone freelance. He moved into consultancy and made a lot of contacts. Many months and much negotiating later, we took a space here. It was an empty office, we had one project from Sony, no people, and a tight deadline. From there, our initial problem was hiring more people, and that's a big part of Guildford, because there's such a community, a pool of people here. We needed to grow to 20, 30 people very quickly. Today, we've just hit 70 people with a wider variety of projects. We had a strong business plan but were determined to keep it in the background and get people to be excited to come in each morning. An environment of creativity, keeping the business part at the side – the notion that it's there and sorted.

Did you hire exclusively from the local community?
People come down to Guildford from all sorts of places. There's a buzz about the place. I think the community has reached a critical mass – it's self-sustaining. One of the attractions is that if it doesn't work out there's a pick of seven or eight other studios. There's massive variety down here and there's an outsourcing community too. In their careers, people often work for more than one company – you go to the pub and know there'll be guys there from other studios.

Who is Supermassive targeting, and how does the studio's structure reflect that?
We've set out to be 'genre agnostic' and our business model is to meet the needs of clients. For us, that's Sony and a broad, family audience. When you come in here, it's not about the game you're going to work on – for us it's about coming to a place where you can be part of an environment and contribute everything you can. Our structure is really different to a lot of other studios'.

We have no producers or project managers in our studio. We set a broad direction for where we need to go and what we need to do. The important thing is that we're always looking at the software and playing it. It's a collective effort, with a team rather than an individual focus. You have to be very flexible to do that.

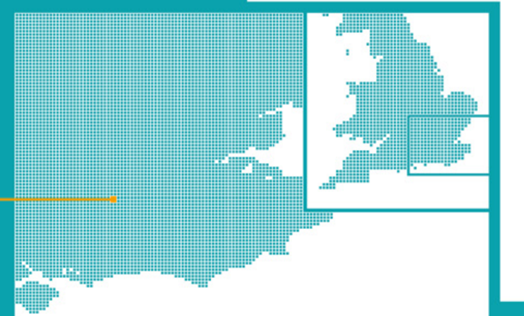
What does the future hold beyond your PlayStation Move debut?
It's about going where the clients need us to. For our next round of projects, it's much more about us showing ideas off and taking them to the client, initiating productions ourselves. The world's changing rapidly – there's a big transition happening and we're really interested in exploring what's happening with things like PSN, online and the casual explosion. You've got to take notice of that.

LIONHEAD STUDIOS

One of the biggest players in the region retains the ethos of founder Peter Molyneux's early days

LIONHEAD STUDIOS

- **NAME:** Lionhead Studios
- **LOCATION:** Guildford
- **FOUNDED:** 1997
- **EMPLOYEES:** 191
- **URL:** www.lionhead.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *Black & White*, *Fable II*, *The Movies*



Lionhead's growth from house of PC god games to massmarket franchise developer has been gradual, but today it finds itself a key part of Microsoft's game-making empire. Underneath it all lies a studio that never loses sight of where it came from, or where it's headed, via both careful iteration and bold design leaps.

Outwardly, Lionhead's home is as unremarkable as any of the structures on the research park that houses it (unless you recognise these buildings from *Syndicate*, which took them as inspiration for its futuristic cityscape). Even inside there are few signifiers that this is the breeding ground for some of the UK's most respected and beloved gaming exports. A row of muddy running shoes lines the back entrance and the coffee shop is full of healthy options and seasonal produce. Glimpses of posters featuring company co-founder Peter Molyneux's face selling snake oil are the first indicator of the eccentric creativity quietly at work.

Alongside its core interests, Lionhead is leading the way with a placement scheme that pools from London universities, and though the places are limited, it's a sign of the forward-thinking and active community engagement that has helped the company to make such an impact on the videogame landscape. As its work on Xbox 360 and the console's upcoming Natal peripheral continues, Lionhead's future is certain to remain in the spotlight.

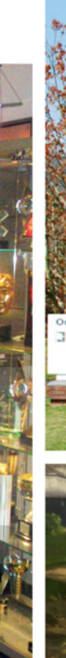




Lionhead's debut title, *Black & White* (top), has sold more than two million copies. Its more recent work includes *The Movies* (centre) and the renowned *Fable* series







As part of Microsoft, Lionhead has been charged with showing what Natal can do. The result, *Milo And Kate*, focuses on interaction with artificial life

Interview: Louise Murray

Head of *Fable* franchise

Can you sum up Lionhead's story?
Lionhead started with *Black & White* – built by a much smaller team but a roaring success. From that, we spawned the idea of the satellite studios, developing *The Movies*, *Fable*, *BC* and *Black & White 2*. We've grown from there and were bought by Microsoft in 2006.

How is business and creativity balanced at Lionhead?
Lionhead is all about innovation, trying to do new and different things. We don't want to do licences and just make solid games, we're very design-heavy and design-centric – that's our big focus. While we're good at the technical things, that's secondary. It's about asking if we can do something that's going to delight and intrigue – can we do something different?

What's your take on why Guildford has remained such a strong location for game development?
It's all about the talent and the multiple companies here. Between ourselves, EA and Media Molecule, and lots of small startups like Hello Games and Wonderland, you have the opportunity to attract talent. It's a really nice environment to live in.

Is it an insular community?
It's a small community and everyone does know each other. You're involved in the scene – you go out to the pub and you'll be talking to guys from EA or Media Molecule. It's a breeding ground for ideas and developing healthy competition. It's a very friendly atmosphere but we want our games to be better than everyone else's, and so do they.

With many companies evolving and splintering into smaller pockets of teams, is Lionhead's ethos shifting too?
Every company wants to take its franchises into the mainstream – you want it to be the best it possibly can. Certainly with something like *Fable* that's the ambition – we want it to be the biggest franchise around, but we don't want to lose our game-making completely, because that's what we love and what we're good at. That's why we have additional IP and prototype groups. The smaller companies and outsourcing coming up in Guildford is fantastic. When there's a place for companies like that to work with us, we support them when we can. It makes sense from a business perspective and it helps us build the long-term franchises.

How important to the process of recruitment at Lionhead is local education? And where do you tend to hire from?
It's starting to play a larger role. Generally, we've always looked for really smart people. Typically, we've gone to Cambridge or Imperial and brought graduates into the community here. I think games courses have had a slow start with regard to the quality of candidates they were producing, but that's definitely improving. Peter's very active in the university scene, so education certainly has a huge part to play. We always struggle to recruit the level of candidate we want, but as the standards go up and the students understand the industry more, it's fantastic. It's a young industry and we need a fluid amount of people coming through.


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Digital Media Kingston

industry facing teaching, research and enterprise

DIGITAL MEDIA KINGSTON

With game courses continuing to proliferate, DMK is keeping a step ahead by being truly industry-facing



Interview: Karen L Cham — Director of digital media

As courses aimed at aspiring videogame creators and designers spring up all over the UK and Europe, it's becoming more difficult to discern their value and relevance. Kingston University has the advantage of being surrounded by a wealth of resources it's using to expand and strengthen its set of videogames courses. The aim is to lead the charge into a new, more integrated future for education in the field of game development.



Kingston also offers over 20 postgraduate courses covering subjects as diverse as software engineering, art and space, filmmaking, popular music, web development, informatics and screen design

How have videogame courses evolved in Kingston's education system in recent years?

To improve our undergraduate degrees in Games Technology and Computer Science (Games Programming) we joined Sony's PSP Dev Education programme and have incorporated the development on the platform into one of our modules. We also now teach games development for the Xbox 360 using XNA. At postgraduate level, as part of Digital Media Kingston we're introducing a portfolio of degrees including the Games Development MA and MSc which will involve teams working together with students from different disciplines such as level programming, production design and art in order to teach teamworking and emulate the structures of real games companies. We've developed these courses in consultation with the DMK Industry Panel which includes Sony Computer Entertainment Europe who have also recently agreed to set projects for our students.

How does the rich history and community of Guildford's development scene influence students and courses?

We've had a lot of advice from the games industry on the development of our courses – say, the importance of focusing on C++ over Java – and made good use of industry days where they tell academics what is relevant to teach. Our Masters programmes have been created in consultation with industry – a lead programmer from Codemasters advised on the content of the MSc Games Development, for example. We're keen to extend our links with local companies to keep our courses up to date, recruit visiting staff, set live projects and collaborate on research projects.

- **NAME:** Digital Media Kingston
- **LOCATION:** Kingston upon Thames
- **FOUNDED:** 2009
- **EMPLOYEES:** 30
- **URL:** www.digitalmediakingston.com

Mm

MEDIA MOLECULE

With a chilled approach but serious backing, here's a studio ready to tackle challenges both big and small

- **NAME:** Media Molecule
- **LOCATION:** Guildford
- **FOUNDED:** 2006
- **EMPLOYEES:** 40
- **URL:** www.mediamolecule.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *LittleBigPlanet*

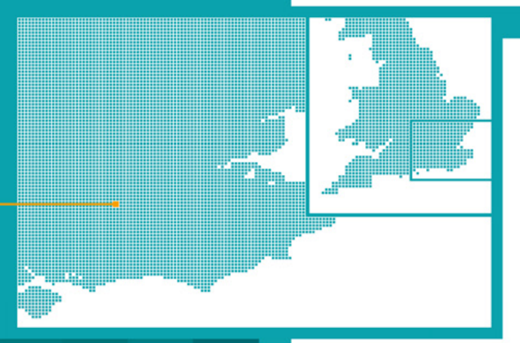






Media Molecule is, of course, best known for *LittleBigPlanet*, the sequel to which was showcased in E215







Interview: Siobhan Reddy

Studio director

Indie development mentality and big-bucks studio backing collide under the funky, flowery canopy of one of the UK's most exciting – and relaxed – studios. Media Molecule's offices aren't really what you'd expect, feeling more like a home than a studio and defined by a sense of family and kinship rather than anything businesslike. Founded by former Lionhead employees Mark Healey, Alex Evans, Kareem Ettouney and David Smith, it's a small studio that, regardless of success, retains its sense of independence and spirited, playful ambition.

Where do you think that Media Molecule's identity has come from?

There's a real mix of people from various companies here. The founders were from Lionhead and Bullfrog and so our culture has definitely benefitted from the 'Peter' effect – he has such a positive impact on the people who worked with him; he really encouraged experimentation and creativity. My background was at Criterion so I brought with me the experience of shipping fun console games on time. Media Molecule is a really nice hybrid of our previous experience.

Having worked at really great companies, shipping successful games, we set out hoping for success. Nobody wanted to work on something commercially or critically unsuccessful. So, the ambition was a combination of wanting to do something creative but real at the same time. We try to push people creatively – that's the benefit of a small team and the point of the molecule. There isn't a hard limit to what someone can do here. Everyone has a core role, like level design/art/code/production, but if they have an interest in other areas they can explore that. Nobody here is a cog. The principle is for people to completely geek out. People who make games are really clever people; you can't expect them to follow a process or system that isn't helpful to them. Less is more.

Being part of a games team is a unique and very forming experience. A strong bond is formed when you ship. I will always have a connection to the *Burnout* team I shipped with. I believe that a family that eats together, stays together – it brings together team members who might not meet each other throughout the day and we have an environment that encourages people to talk. The kitchen in the morning is my favourite time – most people eat breakfast here. We're a bunch of hippies, really!

How does that sort of mentality fit in with a publisher like Sony?

It's very helpful to have people who can say: "Why did you make this decision?" It's beneficial. With any healthy relationship there's friction. We don't need people to say everything's fine all the time. Plus, Sony have always understood and complemented the passion we have for our culture and our games.

Looking to the future, are you interested in exploring other game genres?

The genre we love to be identified by is the 'creative gaming' genre, which is really broad. *LittleBigPlanet* offers a breadth of experience. The point is to expose a game-making tool to people so that they can go off and do their own thing, whether it's racing games or strategy games.

CODEMASTERS GUILDFORD

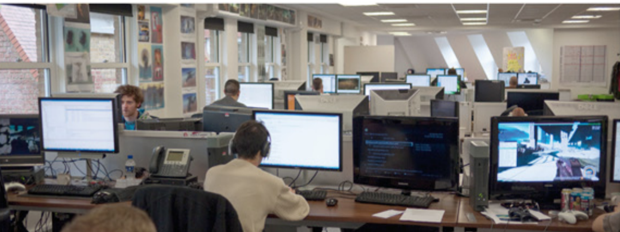
As part of one of the UK's best-known gaming brands, this Surrey studio has its own rich heritage



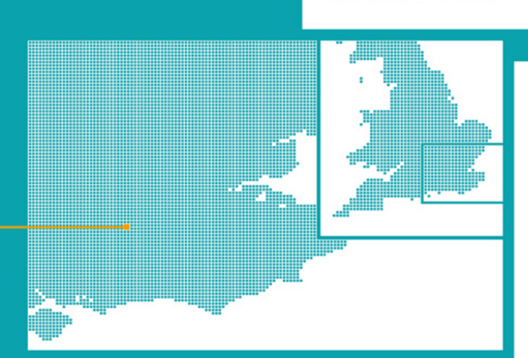
- **NAME:** Codemasters Guildford
- **LOCATION:** Guildford
- **FOUNDED:** 2007
- **EMPLOYEES:** 79
- **URL:** www.codemasters.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *Bodycount*











Interview: Adrian Bolton

Studio manager

A home-grown empire with its roots firmly in the old school, Codemasters has brought its own brand of meticulous design work to each hardware generation. Guildford studio manager **Adrian Bolton**, meanwhile, is an experienced hand within the UK development scene, having worked at US Gold, Silicon Dreams, Elixir and EA Criterion before heading up the operation here.

His studio is a white-walled complex in which work continues on explosive FPS *Bodycount*. There's a sterility to the site that reinforces a strong sense of organisation and infrastructure, while the dusty old arcade cabinet in the reception area reminds you what it's really all about.

How does Codemasters fit into the overall Guildford scene?

A lot of us here are imports from other companies – some local, some abroad. When we originally set up, it was very much about the IP and high-end stuff. This is a hotbed of experience and talent. You need both – that balance. You need people that have done big, high-end stuff who know what it takes to shift this product. The original plan was new IP, so this is a great catchment area. The decision to set up here wasn't taken lightly – it's one of the biggest concentrations of capability in the country.

The big challenge we have is in the shape of things to come. The general feeling is that it's about content – the platform is arguably going to become less and less important. Guildford is very exciting because you've got companies pushing in so many areas. As an ecosystem it's very strong.

How does Codemasters' output reflect the Guildford development mindset?

You can wax lyrical about Bullfrog and you can't help but be attracted to what they were doing – *Magic Carpet*, *Populous* – that kind of focus on quality, not just put together in shifts. There's a sense of craftsmanship that I think pervades all of this area. It's what we want here – quality.

What key areas do you channel your resources into during a lengthy development cycle?

The first is people. We spend a lot of time hiring carefully and working out how they work as a team. It stopped being a one-man sport a long time ago. We spend a lot of time on process, too, trying to make it as light as possible. When you've got a 70-man core team, you need to disseminate enough of the process evenly. When the water's rising, you need to know where to spend money.

It's very difficult to get really creative across multiple sites and places. I think we're really bad as an industry at throwing massive teams at projects early on and then brute-forcing our way through it. I think this kind of scenario in Guildford is a great step, because there are pockets of experience you can link up with.





Codemasters' forthcoming firstperson shooter *Bodycount* (featured in E213) is built on the Ego engine used in *Grid* and *Dirt*







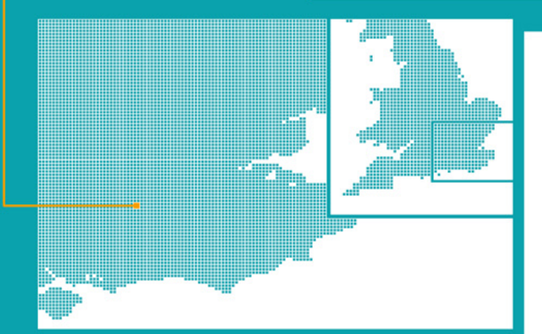
FIREPROOF STUDIOS

Sitting pretty with established studios around it, Fireproof offers outsourcing with experience

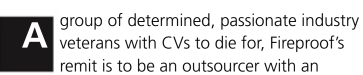
- **NAME:** Fireproof Studios Ltd
- **LOCATION:** Guildford
- **FOUNDED:** 2008
- **EMPLOYEES:** 7
- **URL:** www.fireproofstudios.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *LittleBigPlanet, Burnout Paradise*



Fireproof Studios was founded to keep a tight-knit team together, and makes a big point of its shared experience



Interview: Barry Meade



Co-founder

A group of determined, passionate industry veterans with CVs to die for, Fireproof's remit is to be an outsourcer with an in-house level of knowledge and expertise.

The high-pressure nature of the development cycle can make or break a team and a title. The jobs are many – from world modelling to asset creation – and the risks are high. And very often the workload can overpower and overflow. This is where Fireproof Studios steps in. Built on the principle that what can be done in-house can also be done off-site, the company is pioneering a model of contract videogame design work that's built on a strong knowledge of what goes on behind the scenes.

How did Fireproof get started?

As leads of *Burnout*'s world team for more than five years we'd become a really tight group. We also shared the same values: to a man we all loved making games and had a take-on-the-world approach. After *Paradise* the team faced dispersal and we really didn't want to break up our games-making machine as we quickly realised that beyond triple-A art, it's the actual process of making games that we excelled at. We're artists but also game developers – many know the art but we know the craft. So we resigned and created Fireproof as an art studio that can collaborate on development with other studios, kind of like a design house for games dev but with less wank and far less money. We'd worked with many outsourcers ourselves – when we were making *Burnout* our option list of freelancers had a giant Fireproof-shaped hole in it, so when we left Criterion we knew exactly what we had to do!

But there's a simpler side to it: we're a pretty lo-fi bunch with a small footprint and even smaller overheads. Making games these days is too over-complicated so we want to help our clients by causing them as little hassle as humanly possible.

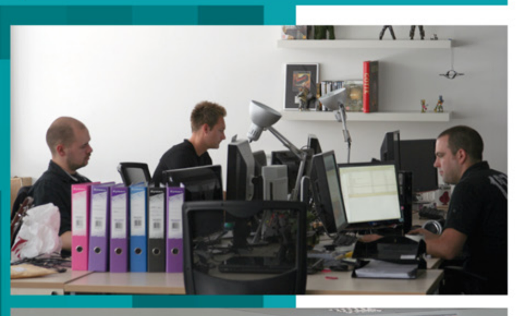
How does work from farther away – as with Freestyle Games in Leamington Spa – come to your door?

Word of mouth, really – the Freestyle guys knew the Media Molecule guys and we proved ourselves through working with studios like those two and Bizarre Creations. If we have a goal as a studio, it's to work with the best developers in the world. If we have a niche, it's quality. We've proven we don't need to be on-site to take on radical work and that's only because we're a dev team ourselves.

What is it about Guildford that makes it such a hotbed for videogame development?

Bullfrog, I'd say. Lionhead, Media Molecule – these studios' attitudes are traced back to our days at Bullfrog, when we didn't care about anything except how good the games were. I'd go so far as to say that's the flavour of Guildford. Criterion too had that same Bullfrog super-ambition and it's in Fireproof to our back teeth as we have a history in both studios. So studios here are spreading the culture of that era. In 1995 Bullfrog spawned a lot of smaller companies so Guildford was, and is, an exciting place as we find ourselves with a bunch of top-tier studios in town. Recession can wake you up – people thought we were nuts for leaving Criterion when we did, but we're very happy and haven't looked back.









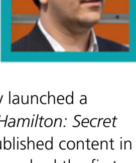

NDREAMS


Wonderland
SOFTWARE







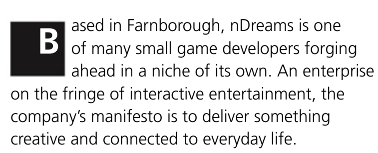



CEO

NDREAMS

After producing the first ever console ARG, nDreams is branching out into social gaming

Interview: Patrick O'Luanaigh



Based in Farnborough, nDreams is one of many small game developers forging ahead in a niche of its own. An enterprise on the fringe of interactive entertainment, the company's manifesto is to deliver something creative and connected to everyday life.

Former Eidos creative director **Patrick O'Luanaigh** explains his decision to move from publishing to something on a smaller scale.



In the ARG *Lewis Hamilton: Secret Life*, players have to help the Formula 1 star train to recover valuable artwork and sculptures. Participants have to work together to solve the mysteries online

Why did you move from a big publisher to start a new studio?
First, I'd always wanted to run my own business and it seemed the ideal timing. Second, I was fed up with the politics of large publishers. And third, even as creative director, it was hard to be creative. Budgets for next-gen projects were so high that it wasn't possible to kick off ambitious, innovative titles.

What's the nDreams story?
I founded nDreams at the end of 2006 to create innovative games, both in terms of game design and business models and platforms. We try to combine self-publishing of original IP and working with partners on the fringes of the games industry, such as TV production companies and film directors. Our first project was *Xi*, the first console alternate-reality game (ARG), which received over five million visits. We've recently launched a second ARG [*Lewis Hamilton: Secret Life*], created and published content in PlayStation Home, launched the first narrative-driven Facebook game, *Spirit Of Adventure*, and started work on other Facebook, iPhone, iPad and console games.

Will socially driven games come to dominate the industry's future?
Social games are a key part of the industry's future, but not the only element. Once issues with online payments and monetisation have been overcome, social network games and browser-based games are going to increase in size, scope and importance. We're focusing primarily on narrative-based games, and creating social games that have rich, powerful and emotional storylines. We think this will be a key growth area in the next few years.

- **NAME:** nDreams
- **LOCATION:** Farnborough
- **FOUNDED:** 2006
- **EMPLOYEES:** 25 in-house, 15-25 external
- **URL:** www.ndreams.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *Xi*, *Spirit Of Adventure*, *Musicality*, *Lewis Hamilton: Secret Life*





MD

WONDERLAND SOFTWARE

A new developer bringing the power of a mighty deity to your fingertips

Interview: Matthew Wiggins



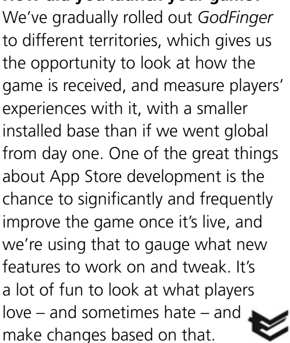
Of the many Guildford-area developers, Wonderland Software is the only one dedicating all of its resources to the brave new world of Apple's App Store. It may be a new face on the landscape but Wonderland's core crew are veterans of Lionhead, Codemasters, Bullfrog… the list goes on. Co-founder and managing director **Matthew Wiggins** explains the joys of going indie and publishing internationally.



GodFinger is a touch-controlled god game for iPhone, iPod Touch and iPad. Worshippers help you grow stronger, and you have a full range of god-like powers including flooding and lightning bolts

As a startup company, how do you make an impact on iPhone?
Just like triple-A development it's a combination of making a unique and appealing game, and getting people to know – and be excited – about it. One of the reasons we partnered with ngmoco for *GodFinger* was the marketing reach they have into the App Store, and the ways we can use their knowhow to make the game as widely known as possible. But regardless of whether you go with a publisher or not, startups need to put just as much effort into marketing as development – both for the game and the company, hopefully building a strong brand around yourself.

How do Apple's platforms differ from more established ones?
As you'd expect, the development times are shorter and it's possible to have smaller teams. This makes the process so much more enjoyable and creative, as the smaller teams don't require as much planning overhead as with a big console game – we can make decisions quickly, and iterate really rapidly on the game. The development environment is also fantastic.



How did you launch your game?
We've gradually rolled out *GodFinger* to different territories, which gives us the opportunity to look at how the game is received, and measure players' experiences with it, with a smaller installed base than if we went global from day one. One of the great things about App Store development is the chance to significantly and frequently improve the game once it's live, and we're using that to gauge what new features to work on and tweak. It's a lot of fun to look at what players love – and sometimes hate – and make changes based on that.

- **NAME:** Wonderland Software
- **LOCATION:** Farnham
- **FOUNDED:** 2009
- **EMPLOYEES:** Five, plus freelancers
- **URL:** www.wonderlandsoftware.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *GodFinger*





Speakers' corner

How Phonetic Arts' tech intends to bring realistic speech to every step of the development process



The technology ships with two preset characters in the form of undercover Navy SEAL Dirk Brandon (above) and warrior princess Riawenna (right)

www.phonetic-arts.com

The march of gaming technology has traditionally been measured with the eyes. Visuals give a solid yardstick by which to measure the jump between hardware generations, but similar leaps in audio are harder to pinpoint. Granted, our methods of gaming gossip and information delivery, print and online, don't really suit audiophiles, but when otherwise believable gameworlds are torpedoed by excruciating dialogue, sound is brought into focus as an area that needs work.

With that in mind, we revisit **Paul Taylor**. We've spoken to the CEO of Phonetic Arts before, in issue 209, when he explained the processes behind the company's audio technology. With his firm now having had the chance to get its products into published games, now is the opportunity to take a look at Phonetic Arts' work in more detail.

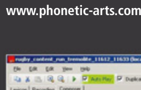
With a career in audio academia and the speechcraft business under his belt, Taylor is a man ideally placed to identify the problem with gaming dialogue nowadays, and to fix it. "Currently, games have a lot of speech, but it's all just recorded audio, played out," he says. "You've got a number of problems there – it's time-consuming to collect and you're limited by the disc. Most importantly, when you're playing a game, there's a method to make it different and interesting – the bad guys don't always pop up at the same time, there's some variation – but the speech is letting the rest down: it's really static." The task of filling an open-world game like *Fallout 3* with dynamic, contextual sound would be monumental using the traditional method, involving literally millions of man hours on the budget sheet. Phonetic Arts' tech scraps that model, offering up new, precise audio on the fly.

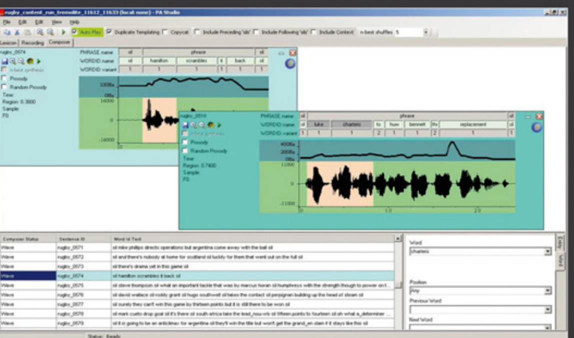


"You can type in anything you want – anything – and it'll replicate that in a style that's clearly recognisable"

Two key systems make up Phonetic Arts' current products: Composer and Generator. We've discussed Generator in detail before, but Taylor offers a quick recap on the voicebox-in-a-program: "Generator learns all the statistical patterns in someone's voice, and creates an entire model of it. Then you can type in anything you want – anything – and it'll replicate that in a style that's clearly recognisable as the original person."

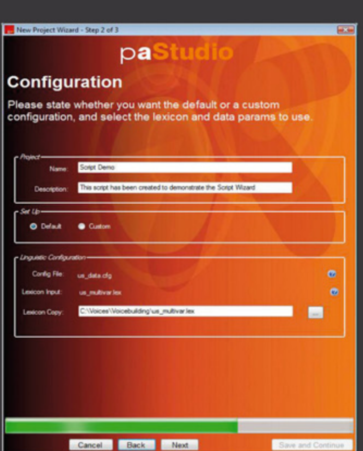
Composer is, from an outside perspective, the 'simpler' technology, designed to take pre-existing sounds, vary their usage, and pull together entirely new lines of dialogue. Essentially an on-the-fly pasteboard, strewn with scraps of cutout words, Composer sits at the back of a game, hastily connecting phonemes and noises to spew forth speech that accurately reflects the events onscreen. Taylor explains how it works: "With Composer, you're restitching recorded waveforms in





Sports games are the early prime market for Composer, the technology intended to make spoken commentary free-flowing, thereby removing the tedium of hearing the same lines over and over





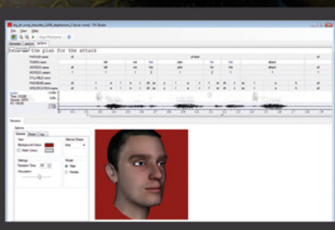
Generator is designed to create entire voiceboxes in a single program, based on existing identified speech patterns

an intelligent way. So if I say 'Rooney passes to Beckham', you can take away 'Beckham' and put in 'Ronaldo' and it'll blend over the join to make it seamless. It's real waveforms combined in lots of different ways, so it sounds extremely natural."

Understandably to anyone who's played a modern football game featuring commentary, this kind of technology is getting some serious attention among developers of sports games. "You're really playing the same game again and again, so you can hear Composer's application. When you're playing *FIFA*, after a while you'll say: 'I really have heard this before'." Composer's application is clear in this context, with a pool of words free to be slotted into their required place without fear of a strange tone making the entire line sound like a railway announcement. Having already worked with the team behind *FIFA*, Taylor confirms that other EA Sports developers are looking at Phonetic Arts' output. With the technology proven to work for commentary, the mind is free to wonder about its future usage: perhaps an *Oblivion* in which NPCs cough up realistic discussions on the fly.

Despite being a young company, Phonetic Arts has already worked with Acronym Studios, EA, Bethesda and Ninja Theory (on the upcoming *Enslaved*). "For example, with Ninja Theory, they did all their alpha testing without any voices, and it takes a big jump of imagination for people to do the testing that way," says Taylor. Both Composer and Generator are used early in development to furnish skeletal builds of games with basic, acceptable dialogue. "Writers love it," says Taylor, explaining that the tech allows those creating words to get an ear for them in context. "Dialogue is often done right at the end of development. So what we've done is give the ability to write the script early in the game, then have voices provided by our Generator technology so you have a complete audio script at every stage. Then, at the last stage, you get rid of that and replace it with real dialogue. Developers love this because it means they can pace the game and test all the levels properly."

But Phonetic Arts' technology isn't designed to be kept entirely out of sight. Many games will present the finished product as final audio, with your *FIFA*s and other sports games leaning heavily on the crutch of automatic, stitched commentary to weave a believable sporting atmosphere. Other games in the works bring the dialogue to the fore, says Taylor: "We're working on a couple of kids' games in which you can type in your name and an animated character will speak to you directly." If Peter Molyneux, Milo and Kate have anything to do with it, this fourth-wall-breaking approach is set to become common with Natal, so giving gaming hardware more effective ways of communicating is a valuable step.


Phonetic Arts offers a range of speech-related tech. Its LipSync module quickly visualises data on a 3D model



Gifted orators

Phonetic Arts is packed with heavyweights in the world of speechcraft. Taylor (above) started out as a lecturer at Edinburgh university, progressing to the rank of director at that institution's globally known Centre for Speech Technology Research before moving on to set up his own company, Rhetorical. That was bought out by another corporation, which led him back to academia, teaching then at Cambridge university. Company chairman is Steve Young, Professor of Information Engineering at Cambridge and author of the HTK speech toolkit, used for dictating speech algorithms used over the last few decades. This scientific background is replicated in the rest of the team, as Taylor explains: "Our VP of sales worked for middleware companies, but our engineers all came from the speech business. We're all gamers ourselves and we've had this technology for years, thinking, 'We have to get this working in games'. We checked that no one had done it – no one had – so we brought our technology over."

Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

COMPANY NAME: Vertical Slice

DATE FOUNDED: 2008

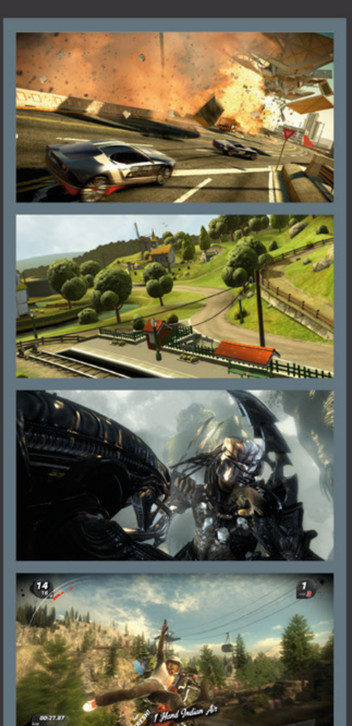
NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 4

KEY STAFF: Dr Graham McAllister (director), Gareth White (playability researcher), Pejman Mirza-Babei (biometrics researcher), Joel Windels (community manager)



URL: www.verticalslice.co.uk

SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY: *Split Second: Velocity*, *Blue Toad Murder Files*, *Aliens Vs Predator*



From its Brighton base, Vertical Slice has had input into games such as *Split Second, Blue Toad Murder Files, Aliens Vs Predator* and *Pure*





LOCATION: Brighton, East Sussex, UK

CURRENT PROJECTS: Unannounced triple-A titles across multiple genres and platforms

ABOUT THE STUDIO:

"The UK's first usability lab to focus solely on videogames, Vertical Slice stems from original research undertaken at the University of Sussex. Frustrated with glaring usability issues in the industry, leading academic Dr Graham McAllister founded the company with a firm belief in using novel techniques to improve the quality of videogames. Vertical Slice is transforming the development process through objective and thorough studies conducted by PhD researchers.

"The Vertical Slice team have built solid relationships with many of the largest publishers in the world and have worked on some of the best-selling and most critically acclaimed titles of the past year. The company collaborates with developers as early as possible and maintains a healthy correspondence throughout the development process and beyond, which allows for the most effective and accurate usability analysis possible.

"Vertical Slice is also pioneering the use of biometrics in usability testing – by recording the player's biological responses to the game, qualitative and quantitative feedback can be aligned to specific moments in the title. Using this approach, emotions such as excitement or frustration can be precisely mapped to scenes within the gaming environment, granting the researchers and developers unprecedented insight into the quality of the game's user experience."




Lead Engine Programmer
Lead Animator
Graphics Programmer
Game/Tools Programmer
Senior 3D Character Artist
3D Character Artist
Senior 3D Environment Artist
3D FX Artist
Senior Designer
Audio Engineer
3D Environment Artist
Game Programmer
UI Artist
It's time.
The Creative Assembly is embarking on a massive new console project and we need the best people.
If you have the talent we have the job.
With a twenty year history making major titles, generating critical acclaim and commercial success our BAFTA award winning UK studio is looking for people who can make a real difference.
If that's you then contact us.
www.creative-assembly.com
the CREATIVE ASSEMBLY™



BY RANDY SMITH

HI, I'M RANDY Videogame design, etc

When is a game not a game?

The only strange thing about this talking wolf is the high quality of its conversation. "I could shoot you, you know," I threaten the wolf, having already established that my daughter might still be alive inside its belly. That wasn't picked from a dialogue menu; I typed it in. Without missing a beat, the wolf responds, "I'm afraid you'll have to." Sentient characters and interactive dialogue have been common this entire play session. Impressed? The game's responses are driven by game designer Jason Rohrer.

Yes, I do mean that he designed this game, *Sleep Is Death*, but I also mean that he's controlling the world I'm exploring and typing in the responses for each character I speak to. It's through the magic of this 'man behind the curtain' solution that *Sleep Is Death* is easily able to bring players to places few videogames are capable of, meaningfully exploring stories about family, euthanasia and coming of age, to name a few.

> Jason's story had a lot of nudity in it, and I felt a little dirty. If I do it with my wife in the story, is that like doing it with Jason?

The technical definition of *SID* is probably 'an asymmetrical, multiuser, collaborative sequential art composition tool'. In other words, two people make a comic strip together. And whereas the player can only move and type for his character, the game master can modify everything else. It's used to make traditional-looking game experiences where the interactions are handled by a person instead of preauthored systems. A common expression when I worked at Looking Glass was "We don't ship the designer in the box", which meant the game needed to be fully capable of handling the player. *SID* ships the designer in the box.

Months earlier, Jason and I were drinking tea in Vermont. "We could play an interactive story right now," he pointed out. "We don't need dice or character sheets. I could describe the scene, and you could tell me what actions you want to take, and I could describe the results." This raises the question: what are rules for? How do they contribute to an interactive experience? Imagine Jason and I playing without rules – having an involved, detailed discussion about, say, a time traveller blasting his way out of alien captivity. Does that seem kind of pointless and dorky? Is it less so if we have charts and dice in front of us?

A good tabletop game master knows when to be flexible. Your character is jumping between rooftops, and a missed landing means certain death and epic story meltdown. So if you fail your roll, the game master decides that your character is now clutching on to an antenna that's slowly starting to bend. This is outside the scope of the known game mechanics but makes for a more engaging experience. It's characteristic of pen-and-paper RPGs that their rules aren't meant to cover all possible interactions. By contrast, a traditional videogame is fully defined and bounded by a static set of mechanics. One approach relies on comprehensive rules and the other relies on human judgment. There's a sense of cold, external objectivity that comes with the rules-bound approach. If you plummet to your death following a failed jump in *Uncharted*, then it's your own fault and the game doesn't become sentient to save your story. Why do we find that so valuable?

It's exactly the subjectivity that to me makes pen-and-paper RPG gaming feel less purposeful than videogames, or purposeful in a different way. The game of *SID* that I experienced had that sense of mushiness, arbitrariness, unstructured interaction, boundless in ways both intoxicating and disillusioning. It was also strangely intimate, a back and forth of cooperation, feeling each other out to determine where this story was going. Jason's story had a lot of nudity in it, and I felt a little dirty. If I do it with my wife in the story, is that like doing it with Jason? It dawned on me that the game is essentially a communication medium – like a telephone that relays pictures instead of voices – more than it is like a traditional game. *SID* games are storytelling work-in-progress, an ongoing collaboration. By contrast, a traditional game is a finished work, a product that has been packaged up and sent into the world for consumption and scrutiny – a piece of art.

If you start with *Uncharted* and subtract *SID*, the fundamental difference is that set of comprehensive, preauthored game mechanics – the thing I've referred to as the Possibility Space and claimed defines videogames as art. The rules are the work itself and the expressive message of the artist, which may make statements about how antennae bend or the negotiating inclinations of wolves, or even family and euthanasia. Much like I'm agnostic about comic books being comical, my definition of 'game' is agnostic about scores, goals, failure and even computers, since board games are another format often powered by objective rules. So, to me, although it looks and acts like a game, *SID* is not. It's a separate artistic entity. Far from a negative judgment about *SID*, it helps us understand games better and explore places we can't yet achieve without human judgement.

Randy Smith is the co-owner of Tiger Style, whose first game, Spider*, is available now for iPhone and iPod Touch*



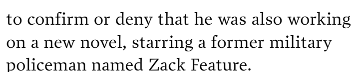
TRIGGER HAPPY Shoot first, ask questions later

Don't believe everything you read

BY STEVEN POOLE

Yesterday the publisher Random House announced that it had sacked Lee Child, author of the enormously successful Jack Reacher series of ultraviolent detective thrillers. In an act of what a Random House SEC filing has described as 'gross insubordination', Child was planning that the next in the series would be an erotic space opera. The job of composing the official Jack Reacher texts will now be delegated to a group of scriveners more sensitive to the publisher's desires. "We own the Jack Reacher IP," said a Random House manager, "and we think you will be very excited about the ways we plan to extend it. There will be Jack Reacher ringtones, Jack Reacher eggcups, and a Jack Reacher musica on rollerskates." Lee Child is countersuing the publisher on the basis that its staff are spittle-flecked idiots. He refused to confirm or deny that he was also working on a new novel, starring a former military policeman named Zack Feature.

> 'Every copy of Romeo And Juliet should totally be forced to display a big red X and a giant blue cock on the cover'



In other news, travel restrictions did not prevent three major publishing houses showing off their new motion-control systems at the London Book Fair. The chief technology officer of Bloomsbury sneered: "Readers are bored with simply turning a page to find out what happens next. With our new Get Off™ peripheral, they will have to execute a flying crescent-kick wearing kung-fu slippers, or mime a wooden puppet whose strings have just been cut." Next door, rival Fourth Estate was pushing its own 3D display technology. "We think readers are bored with the same old flat words," whispered its bug-eyed spokesman. "Lettering that is truly three-dimensional will empower a new level of immersion. Your favourite words — like, maybe, 'plinth' or 'flange' — will quite literally jump off the page."

These publishers are all hoping to surf the recent wave of unusual mainstream media attention for their medium after a book entitled Chevy Brayne was hailed as the closest literature has yet come to fulfilling its promise as a fusion of 1980s hair-metal with edgy contemporary dance. A 15-year-old reviewer for the Guardian wrote: "Arguments have raged for centuries over whether books can really be art. But with its hypnotic elbow jerking and heavily chorused guitar solos, Chevy Brayne puts that issue definitively to rest." Among the hardcore reading fraternity, on the other hand, some notes of scepticism were sounded. "The writer of this book promised us for years that it wouldn't be what it looked like in demos, which is essentially just one word after another in a linear order," fumed one enraged nerd. "And yet, for all the body-popping in baggy Y-fronts and squealing pinched harmonics, that's exactly what it is. I might as well be reading Nicholas sodding Nickleby."

The debate continued to simmer in the serious press, however, as to whether books retard children's development. The author of a new government-commissioned report, Kanye Mould, announced this morning: "It's obvious that videogames like *Ace Attorney Investigations: Miles Edgeworth* teach our children the critical life skills of logic and deduction, and offer them valuable preparation for careers in academic philosophy as argumentation theorists. On the other hand, parents are rightly worried that too many children are spending hours a day slack-jawed on the sofa, passively consuming books that brainwash them into thinking that it is possible to have sexual intercourse with vampires, or that there exist schools for wizards."

Among Mould's recommendations were that the cover of every book sold should feature enormous colour icons warning parents of false (a big red X) or immoral (a giant blue cock) information contained therein, as well as icons (to be determined) for clumsy prose, improper use of statistics, or poor paragraphing. "Parents need to know that their children's vulnerable young minds are not being twisted by books," said one parent, waving a crudely whittled stick in the camera's face. "Every copy of Romeo And Juliet should totally be forced to display a big red X and a giant blue cock on the cover."

Finally, readers worldwide were flummoxed by technical issues bedevilling the latest episode of downloadable content released for Don DeLillo's celebrated novel Underworld, which added a new epilogue chapter in which Lady Gaga tortures George Osborne to death on the boiling slopes of an Icelandic volcano. Book lovers desperate to see exactly what hi-def outrages Gaga would perpetrate upon the Tory's pasty flesh under cover of the putrid ash cloud were frustrated by a bug that not only rendered the existing novel unreadable but caused customers to be unable to read anything at all for 24 hours, including restaurant menus and the destinations on the front of buses. During this time, DeLillo's publisher posted a semi-apologetic message, ending in the word "LOL", on an official internet forum, but no one was able to read it.

Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life Of Videogames. Visit him online at stevenpoole.net

A Yarn Hive
A BAD SPIRE OUTRUN
Carer Dirge
A Glades Elm Riot
DIESEL INVERT
REGISTER THEFT
Balk Ammo Trot
Reanalyzed Towns
ARMADA TACKY AIM
DACE SPADE
ABORTED RIM
Aide Prowls Rumor
SALARY LEG
Steamers Fort
ANNALS AT IFFY
Riot Wisps
Cadavers Penis
Archwise Yards
Godfather Taunt
Leaded Zen Golf


VIERA
WIN
A 1080P
LCD TV
Panasonic



BY N'GAI CROAL

PLAYING IN THE DARK ...because people refuse to see

A cake for teacher

If you think about all of the teachers that you had growing up – throughout elementary school, high school, college, etc – which ones did you like the best? The ones that were strict, or the ones that were forgiving? The ones who nurtured you or the ones who pushed you?

I had reason to think about this recently while sitting onstage at a client's offices, answering a variety of questions that the game's executive producer had solicited from his team, all of whom were seated in the audience. While responding to a query about important trends in the videogame industry, I took the opportunity to suggest that the relationship between a developer and a player should not be adversarial; that the *primary* goal of the developer should be not to punish the player, nor even to challenge the player, but rather to *teach* the player. And, furthermore, that the developer should be invested not in the player's failure, but in the player's success.

> By carefully parcelling out abilities and challenges, Valve ensures that players will grasp its mechanics more easily

The game that drove this point home for me was *Portal*. For months before its release, at various EA events, I had seen the game being demoed out of the corner of my eye. And while it looked interesting, each time I drifted by the demo station, I'd say to myself: "It *looks* cool, but I have no idea what's going on or what I'm supposed to do." The reason I didn't understand, of course, is that the slice of the game that was being presented didn't begin the way the game eventually would. Instead, Valve showed a level that was located farther on in the game, which forced its staff to verbally explain *Portal*'s mechanics. But as eloquent as Valve's demo ninjas may be, they weren't as eloquent as the finished game.

In its final incarnation, *Portal* is a masterclass on how to take difficult-to-articulate gameplay concepts and properly educate the player on their use. It opens by automatically placing portals in the environment, then lets players lay down blue portals so that they can emerge from the pre-placed orange portals, before finally allowing players to fire both blue and orange portals; by carefully parcelling out abilities and challenges, Valve ensures that players will grasp its mechanics more easily than if the player were immediately given a fully functional Portal Gun. And where many games rush players through the tutorial levels – it's almost as if developers are ashamed of their professorial function – there's a case to be made that in *Portal*, Rooms 00 through 19 are an extended, entertaining tutorial for the game's mindbending, behind-the-curtain final level and boss battle.

To insist that the primary goal of a game developer is to teach us is not to say that game developers shouldn't challenge us. As students, teachers call on us, give us quizzes, tests and essays. But quizzes, tests and essays aren't the ultimate goal. Nor is the score or the grade. These tools are part of a learning process that will hopefully lead us to master the material. And even though, especially in our younger years, this process may seem adversarial, anyone who has befriended a former teacher as an adult soon, er, learns that their teacher was rooting for them to succeed all along.

So what would it mean for developers to see themselves as teachers? In my ideal world, they wouldn't treat the tutorial function of a game's starting levels as a necessary evil, to be rushed through as quickly and as dutifully as possible. Instead, they would accept that the game begins as soon as the logos fade away, and make sure that the opening moments are as carefully and richly imagined as those that will follow. They would treat their tutorials like a lecture (*BioShock*), an assessment (*Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*) or a mystery (*Uncharted 2: Among Thieves*) that make players want to go deeper. They wouldn't throw a ton of new concepts out right off the bat and expect the player to retain them all; rather, they would dispense them at a manageable pace. And whenever new mechanics were introduced – no matter how late in the game – they would teach players how to use them rather than just tossing them into the deep end.

The challenge, as any teacher will tell you, is that different students learn differently. I may have described my ideal game instructional experience, but it may not be yours. Some of us respond well to sink-or-swim. Some of us prefer drill sergeants to kindly professors. Some of us learn best from explicit instruction, others learn better from trial and error. So if a typical elementary school teacher is challenged by having to teach a class of 30, pity the poor developer who must teach three million 'students' without the benefit of personal contact that a real teacher can make use of. There is research to be done, but my hunch is that developers could probably learn a lot from talking to teachers, if only to learn the educational tools and teacher personalities that are most appropriate to the games they're working on. And if I'm correct? Huge success.

N'Gai Croal is a writer and videogame design consultant. You can follow him online at ncroal.tumblr.com

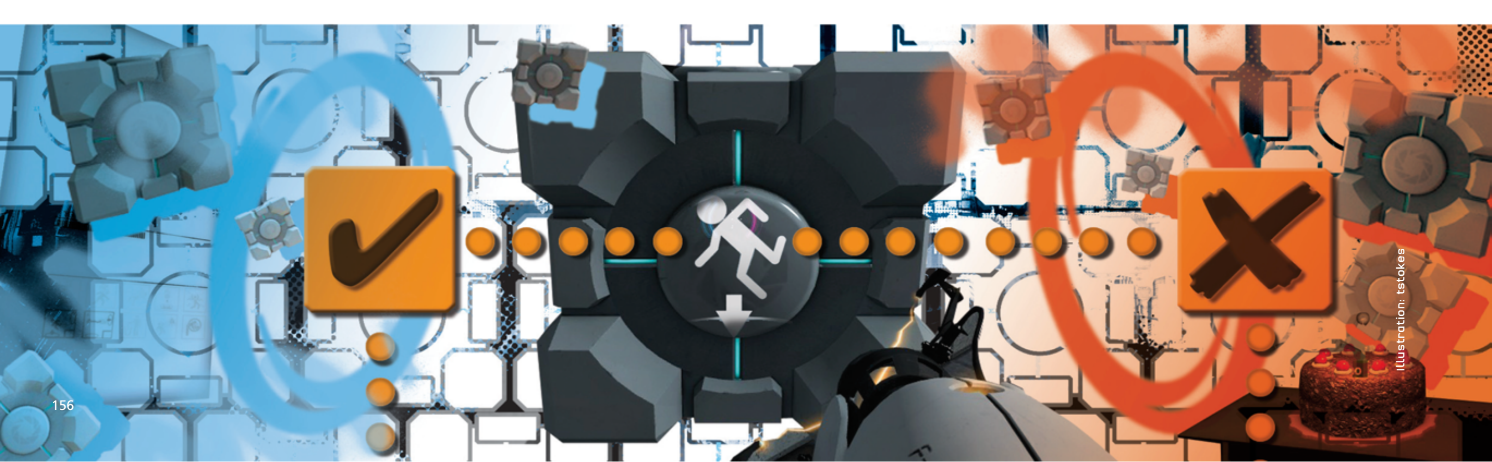


Illustration: tstokes

inbox



Issue 215

ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum
forum.edge-online.co.uk

Topic: Rollercoaster Tycoon riding to the screen
With a Norwegian director, this HAS to be good. And why *Rollercoaster Tycoon*, and not Monopoly? What will the plot be?
HaukC

Based on my old *Rollercoaster Tycoon* games I look forward to the climax of the film, where the screams, pukes and whiny customers all get too much, and the owner builds a rollercoaster that launches everyone into the air and uses the giant tweezers to put the biggest jerks together on a tiny island prison.
mr_shoe_uk

Two weeks until *Theme Park* gets green lit then.
TingleFan117

After reading **Edge**'s cover story on PlayStation Move [**E**214], I have to say that I don't get it. The bulk of the article strikes a fairly enthusiastic tone and the idea of 1:1 movement sounds interesting, if *very* similar to what the Wii has already been doing for four years. However, looking at the lineup of games, I have to say that my interest level dropped to near zero. Minigame collections? Yawn.

This is the Wii with 1:1 movement and HD graphics. As an add-on I just don't see this succeeding. It seems to be an N64 RAM cart or EyeToy all over again (ie, it adds something new, but nothing exciting or different enough for everyone to have to have it). In order for something like this to succeed it has to truly provide something new. For example, I don't think the successor to the Wii would succeed if all it added was 1:1 and HD graphics. I'm still sceptical about Natal as well, since there's bound to be a barrage of minigames, but at least that seems to provide something completely new.
David Dahl-Hansson

PlayStation Move has no reason to be disliked by hardcore FPS gamers. I was reading about Move a little more and was disappointed to find a bowling game – I was nearly sick! Move is a lot more advanced than that. I think *SOCOM* took a step in the right direction with Move but it still could have been implemented better. My idea should work – it's based on how PC gaming works, which should appeal to FPS fans. The add-on controller's joystick will control movement (like WASD) and the part with the sphere will act as a mouse. It will work in almost the exact same way: move left and right for looking beside you; up and down for looking up and down. And to emulate the mouse being lifted to get the control centred after moving it, a button will be pressed and held to stop Move sensing your movement.

I know people will say it won't work, but I can see it working well. Just imagine it in your hand. Aiming will only need small, precise movements. It might be a slight learning curve for some people, but I think it would catch on, and it would really help in games like *Bad Company 2* where you often have to compromise turning speed for long-range accuracy, or vice versa.

I wonder when, if ever, we'll see a narrative that pioneers and perhaps requires co-op play in a way that extends beyond giving leg-ups and hand-slaps

If Sony really wants to beat the competition, it needs to get people using this for FPS games, and maybe giving older FPS games this option too.

Oh, and freelook (using head tracking to look left and right while still running forwards) would be great, and there's no reason why it can't be done. It's another thing that the PC has proved works well. The hardware is there! I'll be angry if it goes to waste on games like 'point out where Wally is'.
Leon Deeley

Sony wants Move to straddle both sides, with party-styled minigames sitting next to experiences aimed at more traditional gaming audiences. As for it replacing joypads for FPS control, we can't see it happening universally, although our experiences with Move-driven *SOCOM* have been more encouraging than we expected. Once the E3 dust has settled, a much clearer picture will emerge.



Letter of the month wins a DSi XL

Xbox Live general manager Marc Whitten has said that Natal "isn't just about gaming" and will learn about us, getting "smarter to create a more tailored entertainment experience". It's quite possible that this statement is damage limitation from Sony's well-received showings of Move, as Natal still hasn't yet demonstrated how – or if – it can solve the problem of gaming without buttons. But aside from that, statements about tailored entertainment have obvious commercial implications that many will be familiar with but maybe haven't thought through to their natural conclusion.

It doesn't take a genius to know that when Amazon says "You might also like…" what it means is "We could also make you buy…" And when you log in to your Gmail the adverts will be familiar because they're being suggested by the content of your emails. But Natal can take this further, because it will supposedly be able to recognise emotions. So would it really be such a stretch to imagine Microsoft or Sony recognising that we laughed at The Hangover, and then showing us the



trailers for Forgetting Sarah Marshall with the option to watch or buy? Would enjoying *Final Fantasy XIII* lead you to anything other than *I* through *XII*?

We all have our own tastes, but they say familiarity breeds contempt and there is no disincentive for companies to stop selling us more of the same until we can take no more – or, worse, be aware of no more. At what point would we get exposed to *Braid*? To *Ico*? To *LittleBigPlanet*? How would these uniquely enjoyable titles fit into Natal's learning? And, if not, would any more ever get made?

Today, just being signed into Live presents me with a range of panels. All of these are designed to sell me stuff – but I didn't come here to shop and I know that most of them will have no relevance to me, so I can move on to what I want to do. Whitten has every incentive to use Natal to stop me doing that – to narrow my experiences down to profit margins, using data gathered from reactions that I have no choice but to give if the camera is plugged in. And suddenly I find another reason to resist letting motion control take more than just a joypad out of my hands.
Lee Hyde

I feel that paying the fees demanded for my hardware and software should give me the right to use them however I want – even if it is really weird

We wonder how accurate Natal will be in identifying a snarl of victory or a look of bitter disappointment. For now, you'll have to start working on your poker face while trying not to look into the camera of your new DSi XL.

Marcus Waldock's letter in **E**215 got me wondering about the current divide between on- and offline play. It feels more than ever that our new 'connected' generation is, in fact, getting more and more disconnected from singleplayer gaming. Even mega-hits like *COD:MW2* are sold and bought as much on their multiplayer offerings as their campaigns. The rise of the MMO has certainly brought people together under the roof of online gaming, but I wonder when, if ever, there'll be a truly immersive co-operative experience designed primarily for a handful of gamers. Not just a bolt-on co-op mode, but a narrative that pioneers and perhaps requires co-op play in a way that extends beyond giving leg-ups and hand-slaps (yes, you, *Army Of Two*). *Borderlands* is the only memorable recent attempt I can think of and even that strayed more into MMO territory.

Japan has used portable gaming devices to cross the social divide. *Monster Hunter* is an obvious example of people getting together and playing an intimate action game, but again it veers closer to MMO than story-driven play. I know it's difficult to divide protagonist duties among two or more characters but my hopes are high that in the next couple of years games can really pioneer a sense of importance and urgency for co-op play, bringing together the intimacy of a couch-based session of *GoldenEye* with the drama of a good old-fashioned yarn.
David Peterson

Left 4 Dead's campaigns drop players into classic zombie movie tales of unlikely allies thrown together, a narrative only strengthened by the presence of unreliable, medkit-hogging allies. The problem, as you note, is that making this stuff is *hard*. *Lost Planet 2* is hardly an all-round success, but its multiplayer throws up plenty of thrills. Give it a shot.

For my seventh birthday I got my first games system. It was an Amiga 500. My mum plugged all the bits in and I eagerly loaded a copy of *New Zealand Story*. "But mum!" I cried, "the controls are backwards!" I couldn't figure out what was wrong and neither could mum so I learned to play every game on my Amiga with the controls reversed. When a friend came round six weeks later and pointed out that mum had stuck the joystick to the desk the wrong way round I found I could no longer play games with the controls the right way. For the next five years I played every Amiga game (even *Street Fighter II*) with the controls backwards.

My control systems since then have grown increasingly bizarre, mostly to avoid issues with individual games (and I could insert a long list of silly developer and player mistakes here). But wouldn't it be nice if the game itself asked me how I want to use my own controls? An increasing number of game features are dealt with globally through the operating system; why not controls? After all, who hasn't thought how great it would be to shift a few buttons around, then found the options aren't available in the menu? Or maybe you want to try playing a game another way (say, adding motion control to *SFIV* or Balance Board movement to *Zelda*)? This could also be used to add backwards compatibility to new

Continued



Leon Deeley suggests Sony should be targeting Move at the FPS scene, citing benefits to *Bad Company 2*



Topic: The left behind

I've got one weak eye and 3D films don't work for me. If Nintendo, Sony and MS get their way then the next generation of hardware is going to have a very strong 3D component. It isn't going to work for me. We're already leaving some gamers behind with poor design decisions for audio and colour use. What about the next gen when, if things carry on as they are, the only way you'll be able to play a game is with four functioning limbs, perfect hearing and 20:20 vision?
Ubermod

It always happens like this when they introduce new tech. I'm sure we'll get some sort of way to use it for colour-blind people or people who can't use all their limbs – which is important for me because my dad can only play *Tiger Woods* since having a stroke and losing the ability to use his left arm and hand.
mr t-301

I have poor motor function in my right hand so any kind of two-handed motion-control games like *Metroid* on Wii are out of the question for me. I'm hoping Natal might fix a bit of this because it has no controllers (part of my problem is having to grip and move the controller itself) but, frankly, I'm not optimistic. Most developers can't even be bothered to provide for left-handed players – God forbid that they should ever think about making games that people with disabilities can play and enjoy.
Dan Dare

I have a lazy eye, so I've no idea whether 3D works for me or not. I'm more worried about further into the future – I might be stuck if they introduce VR helmets that track eye movement and stuff.
EvilRedEye

peripherals when playing older games.

So my point is simply this: for the £30-40 price tag of most games and the 18-month development time of some, can developers continue to make the casual assumption that I don't want to fire with 'start' and reload with 'select'? I feel that paying the fees demanded for my hardware and software should give me the right to use them however I want – even if it is really weird.

Ric Howarth

Hear, hear. We really want to know, though: is your mum forgiven yet?

I read your review of *Split Second: Velocity* [**E**215] with interest and was surprised that no mention was made of what I thought was the most innovative feature: the HUD being behind the car. Most racing games I've played have the HUD plastered around the corners of the screen, which can get in the way of the action. The only other option seems to be to have no HUD at all, which I find just leaves the player feeling lost and confused.

Up until now, it seemed like there was no alternative. But *Split Second* appears to have come up with a new idea: attach all the HUD info to the back of the car, since, after all, do you ever need to see that little bit of road/track behind the car? I thought this was a very innovative use of space and, as far as I'm aware, it's the first time it has been done. Admittedly, I haven't played that many new racing games – the last one I bought was *MotorStorm: Arctic Edge* for the PSP. Thus, I might simply be behind the times.

This then got me thinking that sometimes it's unfair to judge a game with a simple X out of ten. The game itself might be a bit lacking, but what if it introduced so many new features and ideas that it invented a new genre, or reignited one (so, for example, *Heavy Rain* might not be the best game in the world, but for new UI ideas it might get ten out of ten)? Conversely, a game that might score very highly (*Fallout 3*, *Oblivion 4*, *Twilight Princess*, *GTAIV*) might get lower scores for being simply 'fun to play' (in my experience, anyway – I'm looking at you, *GTAIV*: stop marking me down for ignoring a request from a contact to go bowling when I'm busy trying to get to a mission. I get pestered enough by my wife to socialise – I don't need a game to do it too!)

I guess this is the problem with scores: publishers want a simple score they can slap on their box, while users want a really in-depth ratings system that ranks many aspects of the game. This is, I guess, what I expect the text of a review to do. But when the reviewer ends up focusing on one element of a game and forgets to appraise all aspects of it, the reader can get very misled. The review of *Super Mario Galaxy 2* [**E**215] falls in to this bracket – to me, it seemed to concentrate on one aspect (how the game is the ultimate in reinventing old clichés in platforming) without really telling me much about the game itself – ie, what the premise of the game is, what you do for most of it, and whether it's actually fun.

In future, I'd love it if reviews had to cover certain aspects of a game so you get a fuller picture of it, rather than simply concentrating on one particular aspect at which it might excel.

Rupert Plumridge



Topic: Cinema adverts for games

I partook in the viewing of a film today at the local motion picture theatre, and one of the preceding adverts was for *Red Dead Redemption*. I was moderately stoked for the game, but the trailer was just a bit embarrassing and in general just felt unconvincing.

Even more damning, the writing and delivery of lines, with Rockstar generally providing some of the best in videogaming terms, were limp and clichéd among the rest of the trailers.

There's a few things I took from this – firstly, that games shouldn't yet be pushing for realism, they're still too far off and that a consistent stylised approach works better. If I'm already a videogame fan, how incredibly cringe-worthy will this be to most others? They're just going to reconfirm their belief that games are pathetic. Mostly, though, it's that the comparison to films is not flattering to videogames, certainly not in terms of visuals (generally) and narrative, so it does few favours presenting them in such a way – but this also reminds me of a positive, that when playing *Red Dead Redemption* I'll be judging it on its own terms, as a game, and probably love it. I doubt I'll notice its clunky aspects or be worrying about how it falls short of film in some respects.

mr_shoe_uk

The likes of the first *GTAIV* trailer, the *Gears* ad with the emo version of Mad World and some of the *Halo* efforts will stand up far better next to film trailers.

Aye Are

Seeing adverts for games before films validates my hobby to my girlfriend. I nudge her in the ribs and go "EH? EH?"

regmcfly



Rupert Plumridge hails the effort *Split Second* expends in delivering a carefully refined HUD

I couldn't agree more with Marcus Waldock's letter about *Mass Effect 2* [**E**215]. I too am on my fourth playthrough and am about to complete the game on Insane. I honestly can't praise it enough. The graphics (which, in games, I've had little interest in until now) are stunning. The characters are brilliant, except stupid Jack, who I spend much of the time wanting to throw in front of charging Krogan. (How happy I was after her loyalty mission that she finally put on some clothes!) I also now fully understand and appreciate the joys of Biotic and Tech, as they are vastly improved from *ME1*.

ME2 has, however, made me question my own morality, as I have seemingly become some sort of digital sexual predator, prowling the corridors of the Normandy choosing my next bit of stuff like some promiscuous but rather sad individual. I've begun heading over to see them after every mission to see if they'll say anything new. This ultimately ends up making me look a bit sad and desperate. Mordin eventually told me to "go away" in no uncertain terms, but never fear, I'll have him on the next playthrough!

My only criticism of the game, if I had to find one, is the lack of love for Grunt, who I personally believe would give the best bear hugs to help ease the tension on those long, cold, outer-space evenings. Poor Grunt. I do love him so!

Here's a link to a song I came up with after playing *ME1*: www.tinyurl.com/alenko – I hope you enjoy it!

Lucy Hunt

We believe that's what's called a line in the sand, and await links to further reader-made game tributes in song form with a smidgeon of trepidation.

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